This Sacred Art

The Emergence of the Printed Book in Fifteenth-Century Europe

An Exhibition Curated by Brandon C. Wason, PhD
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A anno seculo dux regis in mente seco in die una misis facti est verbum dixit in manu agni propheta ad zoro-abhel muli falatriti duxerit ubi ad iselum muli isedeceh sacresti duxerit magna diei. Item aur dux sacresti dixit. Populus ille dixit. Hunc dux tempus dixit edificiade. Et facti est verbum dixit manu agni phere dict. Sicquid tempus vos est ut habitet in domo lauritario domi ista derum. Et nunc hic dixit dux exercitui. Pone coda velka lypar vos veltras. Seminalis multis et multilis parvi. Lomelicit is non elli faciun. Bibikser et elli metenti. Derrulis vos et elli tale. Et qui mefredes congredit: multa eas in faculti petens. Hic dixit dux exercitui. Pone coda velka sup vias veltras. Ascendit in mortem potata lignum: et edicatum domui et acceptabilis non est: et glorificabos dixit dux. Respektis ad amplius et ree facti est minus. Et intulit is domui: se eisfalia iluud. Quia ob cantu dixit dux exercitui Nenia domi mea derum et z vos fekturnu multorum in domui sum. Pone hac sup vos phibit sunt reli ne darare voren: et etra prohibita est ne daret germen sui. Et vocati sacreata sup terra et sup metes z sup rinte z sup dixit et sup oled et queciy, pheer hum et sup dominez et sup uniet: et sup omne laboren manu. Et audire zorobabel elius falatriti z iselus blini isedeceh sacresti duxerit magnus et omnes rel ------>
This Sacred Art: The Emergence of the Printed Book in Fifteenth-Century Europe

About the Exhibition

This Sacred Art is an exhibition featuring some of Europe’s oldest printed books. Books printed before 1501 are known as incunabula, meaning “in the cradle” of the printing press era. This exhibition explores how incunabula were printed, decorated, and bound, as well as their content, the book trade, and the enduring influence of these books on later generations.

The title of the exhibit, This Sacred Art, is a translation of the Latin phrase, haec sancta ars, used by Giovanni Andrea Bussi (1417–1475) to refer to the recent invention of printing. Bussi used the phrase in the preface of the 1468 edition of Jerome’s Epistole.

From Manuscript to Print

Johannes Gutenberg (circa 1400–1468) of Mainz, Germany, began printing with movable type in the middle of the fifteenth century. Though printing had already been in use in East Asia prior to Gutenberg’s inventive work, his introduction of printing to Europe had profound social and economic effects in the West. The art of printing proliferated during its first fifty years, and by the end of the fifteenth century about 30,000 separate editions had been printed throughout the continent. Contemporaneous accounts praised the advent of printing because books could be produced quicker, cheaper, and more accurately. More recently, scholars have described the introduction of printing in


The printer’s device used by the Parisian printer, Jodocus Badius (1462–1535), from 1507 to 1520 is one of the oldest depictions of a printing press. On the right is a compositor, setting type according to a manuscript. On the far left is a pressman, pulling a print. In the background left is a man holding ink balls preparing to ink the printing forme. Franciscus de Mayronis, Decalogi, seu, dece[m] pr[ae]ceptorum d[omi]ni (Paris: Josse Badius, 1519). Pitts Theology Library 1519 FRAN.
Europe as revolutionary because of the role it played in distributing and standardizing knowledge.

Prior to the printing press, every book, treatise, sermon, speech, etc. would have been written, letter-by-letter, by hand. Printing introduced a new mechanical method for reproducing written works. Pieces of metal type were produced, imitating the shapes of written letters. When inked, the type would be pressed against paper, leaving the impression of letters on the page. This process was repeatable and by making numerous copies at once, printers were able to reproduce books more efficiently than scribes.

The Renaissance was already underway when the printing press was introduced. A book trade already existed and printing did not initially affect that trade. Books produced as handwritten manuscripts existed alongside books printed using the nascent technology. Despite the different means of putting letters on the page, the printed book continued to share much in common with the manuscript book during its first fifty years. The earliest printed books were decorated with illuminated artwork and lettering. Printed type typically imitated handwriting. Printed books were rubricated (highlighted with red or blue letters and accent markings). And printed books were bound the same way as manuscripts. As the printing technology spread throughout Europe in the latter half of the fifteenth century, printed books began to eclipse manuscript books and eventually shed many of the characteristics that they shared with manuscript books, such as decoration and rubrication.
The Origins of Printing in Mainz

Johannes Gutenberg (circa 1400–1468) was born to a patrician family in Mainz, but he spent much of his early life in Strasbourg. He was a goldsmith by trade, and in 1439 he was making metal mirrors for religious pilgrims. The following decade, he developed a method for printing with movable type. His printing press, ink recipe, method for casting metal type, and ability to combine these technologies to make a printed page was an extraordinary creative work. In 1450, he forged a business partnership with Johann Fust (circa 1400-1466) to produce printed works in Mainz. Peter Schoeffer (circa 1425–1503), Fust’s son-in-law, worked with Gutenberg as well. The pinnacle of Gutenberg and Fust’s partnership was the 42-Line Bible (“Gutenberg Bible”) completed in 1455.

The 42-line Bible was the first substantial work printed in Europe. Preparations likely began around the year 1452, and there were smaller works printed prior to the completion of the Bible, such as an apocalyptic poem called the *Sibyllenbuch* and Aelius Donatus’s *Ars Minor*, which was used for teaching Latin grammar. The text, typeface, and page layout of the Bible imitated manuscript Bibles of the period. According to Enea Silvio Piccolomini (1405–1464), who had seen copies in Frankfurt, the 42-line Bible was of extraordinary quality. Printing the Bible was a massive undertaking and multiple adjustments were made during the printing process to make it more efficient and profitable. Originally the headlines were printed in red ink, but that was abandoned likely because of the additional time it took to print in color. The first nine pages were printed with taller letters and had forty lines per page, but subsequent pages were printed with modified letters so that each page could fit forty-two lines. This modification decreased the number of sheets needed.
to print the Bible. Partway through, they decided to increase the edition size and so they re-set and reprinted second copies for a subset of pages. The Bible was printed with multiple production lines and there were likely at least two presses operating at the same time. It is estimated that around 180 copies of the Bible were printed, mostly on paper, though about a quarter of them were printed on vellum. Printing was likely completed in the year 1455. Less than fifty complete copies are extant today. The Gutenberg Bible had a lasting impact, not only as the first major printed work, but subsequent Latin Bibles based their text on the Gutenberg Bible either directly or indirectly.

After printing the Bible, Gutenberg and Fust parted ways the following year. In 1460, Gutenberg printed the *Catholicon*, a monumental encyclopedia. In 1465, the Archbishop of Mainz awarded him a pension for his “agreeable and willing service.” He died three years later in February of 1468.

Johan Fust and Peter Schoeffer, former partners of Gutenberg, opened their own print shop in Mainz. Together, Fust and Schoeffer published some of the most remarkable books of the fifteenth century, including two Psalters (1457 and 1459), Guillaume Durand’s (d. 1296) *Rationale divinorum officiorum* (1459), and the 48-line Bible (1462). Some of their early printed books incorporated ornamental initial letters that were printed in red and blue ink, which required an intricate printing process. Their 1462 Bible was the first Bible to contain a publication date (August 14, 1462) and a printer’s device. After Fust died in 1466, Schoeffer continued to printing in Mainz into the sixteenth century and his sons took over the business after his death.
Duranti, Guillelmus, Rationale divinorum officiorum. ([Mainz]: Johann Fust and Peter Schoeffer, 6 Oct. 1459). Item on loan from the collection of Stuart A. Rose.
In Praise of the Craftsman: Venetian Printing

While German printers boasted because the “divine gift” of printing originated in Germany, Venetian printers were praised for elevating the craft to new heights. In 1469 and 1470, Johannes de Spira (d. 1470) and Nicolas Jenson (circa 1420–1480) became the first printers in Venice, respectively. The city was attractive to printers because of its confluence of resources and liberal attitude toward scholarship. Thus, Venice quickly became the center of the printing industry as a robust network of printers, scholars, translators, artists, and bookdealers emerged there. Venetian books spread throughout Europe. The city attracted more aspiring printers than any other city in Europe, and the printing industry in Venice in the fifteenth century has been compared to the dot-com boom of Silicon Valley in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Of the two hundred printers in Venice during the fifteenth century, there were successes and failures.

Some of the fifteenth-century’s most highly praised printers hailed from Venice. Jenson made a name for himself in Venice after learning the art of printing in Mainz. His first book, Eusebius’s *De evangelica praeparatione* (1470), debuted a newly cut Roman type, which has been praised as one of the finest exemplars of typography ever produced. Aldus Manutius (circa 1450–1515) was Venetian printer and humanist scholar whose innovative approach to producing high-quality, scholarly editions of classical literature brought him recognition as well.

Works being printed in the Fifteenth Century

The printing of the Bible, the most important book of the Western Church, was a watershed moment in the religious and cultural life of Europe. Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible, known as the Vulgate, was the main biblical text used by this Church for over a millennium. Despite its long history, access to the Bible was not universal. Gutenberg’s printing of the Bible and the numerous subsequent editions, not only in Latin but also various vernacular translations, brought wider access to the Bible for clergy, canon lawyers, and theologians. This led to an increased interest in biblical scholarship, and printed Bibles began to reflect this interest by including marginal and interlinear notes, biblical commentary, indices, and explanations of Hebrew names. Though scholarship of the fifteenth century was primarily interested in the Latin text of the Bible, the following century would bring a renewed interest in the original languages of the Bible (Hebrew and Greek).

One of the major characteristics of the Renaissance was a renewed interest in clas-
VSEBIVM. Pamphili de evangelica praeparatione
latinum ex graco beatissime pater iuflu tuo effeci.
Nam quom eum utrum tum eloquentia: tu multae
rerum perita et igni mirabilis flumine ex his qua
tam traducta sunt praefatio illius sanctitas tua in
dicit: atq; ideo quocpit apud graecos ipsius opera
extit et latina facere instiuerit: evangelica praparatione
qua in urbe forte reperta est: primum agressi tra-
duimus. Quo quidem in libro quasi quodam in speculo uariam ac
t multiplicem doctrinam illius urit licet admirari. Cuncta enim qua ante
ipsum facta fuerant, fuerunt quae tam grce scripta tunc inuenerunt ;
multa certius atque distinctius ipsius etiam auctoris quae scripturum
percepisse multae uidere tur. Ita quom constet nihil fere praecum un
geftum fuisse quod illis temporibus grce scriptum non extaret: nihil
in rebus magnis naturae: abditis quod a philosophis non esset expli-
catum: omnia ille tum memoriae tenacitate: tu metus pcepit acumine:
acut apes solent singulis insidere floribus: indeq; quod ad tem suam
conaudit colligere: in aliter ille undique certiora uerisimilioraue deliget:
mirabiliem libi atq; uanaudit scientia cumulum confecit: multiplices
uarias: philosophorum sectas no ignorati: infintos pene genium
omnium religionis errores tenuit: orbis terrarum historiam seriet s su
dispositam folus cognouit & ceteris tradidit. Nam quom non esset
necius gestas rerum historiam titubare factissime paterni distincta
temporibus patet. Quippe quom natura temporis factat ut quae in ttempo
fuerunt nisi quando fuerit scias: nec suisse quidem, ppter confusionem
uideantur: eo ingenio: studio: industria huic incubuit rei: ut omnium
scriptorum peritam in unum congestam facile inuarent: distinctiusq;
cuncta ipsius suis ut diximus cognouerit auctoris. Conferendo enim
inter se singulos ueritatem quae ab omnibus simul emergebat: nec ab
ullo exprimebatur: consecutus est. Quae omnia ab aliis qua scripsit &
ab hoc opere perspicere licet. Quod ille ideo suscepit: quoniam quom
apud gentii praecarios philosophia uerum nobilissimus esset: ac pristat
paternamq; deorui religionem catholicam ueritatis amore coterpet:
partim accusatibus suum prapositi respondere: partim nostra pro
uiribus suis voluit constire. Iraq: i duas uinerum partis negotium
partitus est: quorum primam quae nunc traducta nobis est: quae illis
sical sources. Though the advent of printing did not engender the Renaissance, it did play an important part in energizing the movement and more widely distributing its humanistic philosophy. Printed books brought increased attention to literary works that had been well represented in the manuscript tradition for centuries, both classical and ecclesiastical, yet some works became widely distributed for the first time through the medium of print. This includes *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) by Titus Lucretius Carus (circa 99 BCE to circa 55 BCE), which is a poem that describes human history and the cosmological makeup of the world through natural means. Lucretius’s poem was virtually unknown during the late Middle Ages, until the Italian humanist Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459) “rediscovered” a manuscript of the poem in 1417, which engendered a renewed interest in Epicureanism, secularization, and atomistic thought.

The advent of printing also amplified the voices of fifteenth-century authors. These contemporaneous works encompassed a wide range of topics, such as histories, decrees, sermons, correspondence, literature, and treatises of a theological, scientific, political, or philosophical nature. Fifteenth-century authors often arranged their own funding for their works to be printed, or printers tried to discern the commercial viability of a work before printing it. Authors also did not own the rights to their writings, except in unusual cases. Thus, a successful work might be reproduced numerous times by various printers looking to make a profit.
Mechanics of Print

During the fifteenth century, printers were typically responsible for designing, carving, and casting their own metal type, since typefounding was not a separate trade until the sixteenth century. Various categories of typefaces were developed in the fifteenth century, which mainly derived from handwritten scripts. The specific types used in printing often depended on the genre of the work being printed, the region of the printer, the language of the printed work, and its time period.

Printing with metal type opened the door to disseminating errors unique to the printing process. Typographical errors not only include misspelled words, but also include upside-down letters, printed spaces, unintentional printing marks, squabbled (out of square) letters, and ink impressions from other printed sheets (offsetting). Sometimes printers caught and corrected these errors and other times the errors persist through all copies of an edition. Through comparison of multiple copies of the same work, bibliographers can sometimes determine how printers made corrections to works partway through a print run.

Arranging the type on a printing forme was a time-consuming process that became increasingly more complex when additional elements were added to the printed page. The earliest printers in Mainz experimented with complex printing techniques. For instance, the 42-line Bible initially printed the headlines for each chapter in red ink, but abandoned the process early on. Fust and Schoeffer introduced a number of printing innovations in their 1457 Psalter, such as musical notations, woodcuts, metal decorations, and three-color printing. Each of these elements increased the time it took to print a book, and therefore they were not typical of most incunabula, although woodcuts, especially for initial letters, became increasingly common toward the close of the century.

Left: Lucretius Carus, Titus, De rerum natura. Add: C. Lycinius: Verses to Nicolaus Priolus (Venice: Theodorus de Ragazomibus, 4 Sept. 1495). Pitts Theology Library 1495 LUCR.

Above: Detail of metal type locked in a printing form. The text is from Genesis 1 in the Latin Bible.
Buyers and Sellers of Incunabula

Incunabula bear witness to the people and institutions that have owned them throughout the centuries. The original owners of these books were usually responsible for transforming the printed sheets into completed books by commissioning people to decorate, rubricate, and bind them. Many book owners would also leave their inscriptions, bookplates, or marginal notes as part of their books’ records. In some cases, however, original bindings were replaced, inscriptions scratched out, or bookplates removed, so that it becomes difficult or impossible to trace the full custodial history of these books. Yet, when it is possible to learn about the previous owners of books, this can shed light on the book trade of the fifteenth century and later as well as how the book fits into larger trends of movement across Europe, the Atlantic, and elsewhere. Knowing who owned and read books (and how they read them) illuminates our understanding of the important roles that these books played in the lives of those who went before us.

The large number of books surviving from the fifteenth century shed light on various aspects of the book trade, such as information about printers, publication dates and locations, financial backers, locations where books were sold and identities of those who purchased them. Making and selling books became a vital industry in places like Venice, where entrepreneurs competed with other printers, artists, merchants, and other tradespeople in their field. Some printers emerged successfully amidst this competitive industry, whereas others, whose stories are lost, had met failure. Printers often reprinted popular works in a competitive market and had to make their editions more appealing to potential buyers. To make their editions stand out, some printers added supplemental content, included endorsements of the work, and updated unsold copies. Early printed books were not issued with a suggested retail price, but bibliographers have determined the value of certain books based on surviving accounts, such as booksellers’ records or owners’ notes in books. One important example of a bookseller’s record is the ledger, or Zornale, of Francesco de Madiis, a bookseller in Venice. His ledger recorded the activity of his bookshop from 1484 to
1488, noting nearly 7,000 sales and listing the prices of a total of 25,000 books. Most of his books were sold as unbound copies, though bound copies are also noted in his ledger.

Though some printers and booksellers sold bound books in the fifteenth century, it was most common for the purchaser to secure his or her own bindings. The materials used for bookbinding often depended upon the owner’s location, budget, and personal taste. Typical binding materials included the skins of calf, goat, sheep, and pig, which were treated and processed in various ways. However, many of the incunabula that survive today do not retain their original bindings. Some were replaced because of damage, wear, or deterioration, but others were replaced for aesthetic reasons to match the tastes of their previous owners, especially those from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During the process of rebinding books, information about the book is often lost by losing the original binding and additional processes such as trimming the textblock, removing manuscript binding waste, and washing the linen paper of the book.

The Enduring Influence of Incunabula.

The printing industry changed dramatically in the nineteenth century. New processes were invented for making paper cheaper and more plentiful. New typefaces were designed to be more efficient. Printing presses became increasingly automated. The mechanization of the printing industry favored productivity over art. Proponents of the Arts and Crafts movement protested the deterioration of beauty in everyday life on account of the mechanical achievements and comforts that the nineteenth century had wrought. In 1888, Emery Walker inspired William Morris to create Kelmscott Press, a small printing press that focused on typography, page design, and the craft of printing. Morris’s vision for his press was to draw on the methods and aesthetics which marked the era before the industrial revolution. He was inspired by incunabula printers such as Nicolas Jenson and Jacobus Rubeus. Morris influenced an entire movement of private press printers at the turn of the twentieth century. Today many letterpress printers continue to produce materials with an emphasis on handwork and craftsmanship. Some, having interest in the aesthetics, techniques, or craftsmanship of fifteenth-century printed books, demonstrate the history of incunabula through their own craft of printing, woodcutting, and illumination.

VSEBIVM Pamphili de evangeliaca preparatione
latinum ex graco beatissime patet iustu tuo effeci.
Nam quem sum uirum tument eloquentia: tu multas
retum peritias et igitur mirabilis flumine ex his quas
iam traducta sunt praestitissimum sanctitas tua in-
dictor: atque ideo quaeque apud gracos ipsius opera
extra latina facere iustuuerit: evangeliaca prapatione
qua in urbe forte reperta est: primum aggressi trad-
duximus. Quo quidem in libro quasi quodam in speculo uariam atque
multiplicem doctrina illius uiri licet admirari. Cuncta enim qua ante
ipsius facta iuuentae fuerunt qua tamen grace scripta tunc inueniri fuerint:
multo certius atque distinctius ipsius etiam auctoris qui scriberunt
perceptisse muius uideretur. Ita quom constuit nihil fere praelorum unius
gestum suisse quod illis temporibus grace scriptum non extaret: nihil
in rebus magnis naturae: abditis quod a philosophis non est explicatum: omnia ille in memoriam tenacitate: ita metis cepit acuminatum:
acut apes solent singulis insidere floribus: inde quod ad rem suam
conducto colligere: no alter ille undid certiora ueri similiora e deligis
mirabilem fibi atque inaudita scientia cumulum conscit: multiceps
variae philosophorum sectarum non ignotarum infinitos pene gentium
omnia religiosis errores tenuit: orbis terrarum historiam sertis suam
dispositam solus cognosuit & ceteris tradidit. Nam quom non est
necius gestae rerum historiam titubare factissime pater nisi distincta
terporibus pateat. Quippe quom natura teporis faciat ut quod f tepore
fuerunt nisi quando fuerit scias: nec suisse quod, pter con fusionem
uideantur: eiingens: studio: industria huic incubuit rei: ut omnium
scriptorum peritiam in unum concentam facile su paupertat distinctius
omnia ipsius suis ut diximus cognoscerit auctoris. Conferendo enim
inter se singulos ueritatem qua ab omnibus simul emergebat: nec ab
ullo eprimedatur: consecutus est. Quae omnia ab aliis quae scriptis &
ab hoc opere perspicere licet. Quod ille ideo suscepit quoniam quem
apud gentii praclaros philosophia uiros nobilissimus esset: ac prisa
patemam a deorae religionem catholicam uestitit amore cotempserit:
partim accepsit suum propositum respondere: partim nostra pro
uilibus suis vultuit confirmare. Itaque si duas unionem partis negotium
partius est: quorum primam qua nunc traducta nobis est: qua illis
Hoc opusculi Artificiosa ad imuenione
imponderi seu caracterisendi absq3 calamis
exaration in ciuitate Maguntij lic effigiatu.

1 Ad eusebiæ deinde industrie per io[h]ez fuist auê
et Petru Schoff der de germhym clerici di-
obis eiusdem est consummati Anno dni. M.
cccx lxii. In vigilia assumpto is virg. marie.