



History 101

Johannes Gutenberg

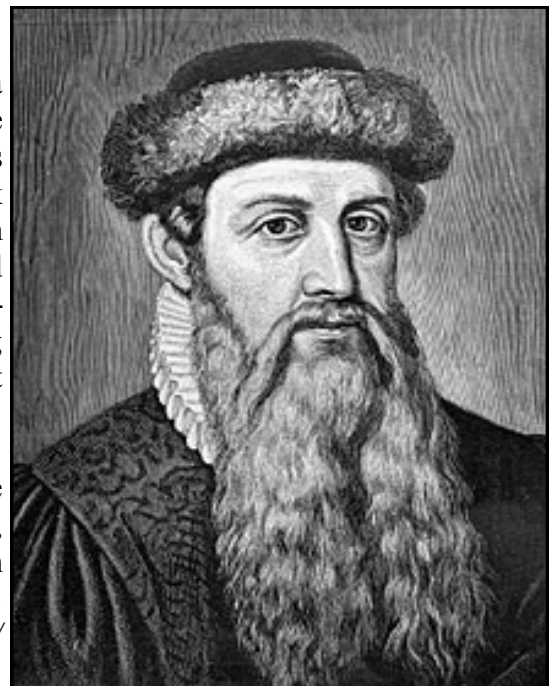
Johannes Gensfleisch zur Laden zum Gutenberg (c.1400–February 3, 1468) was a German blacksmith, goldsmith, printer, and publisher who introduced printing to Europe with the printing press. His introduction of mechanical movable type printing to Europe started the Printing Revolution and is regarded as a milestone of the second millennium, ushering in the modern period of human history. It played a key role in the development of the Renaissance, Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment, and the scientific revolution and laid the material basis for the modern knowledge-based economy and the spread of learning to the masses.

Gutenberg in 1439 was the first European to use movable type. Among his many contributions to printing are: the invention of a process for mass-producing movable type; the use of oil-based ink for printing books; adjustable molds; mechanical movable type; and the use of a wooden printing press similar to the agricultural screw presses of the period. His truly epochal invention was the combination of these elements into a practical system that allowed the mass production of printed books and was economically viable for printers and readers alike.

In Renaissance Europe, the arrival of mechanical movable type printing introduced the era of mass communication which permanently altered the structure of society. The relatively unrestricted circulation of information—including revolutionary ideas—transcended borders, captured the masses in the Reformation and threatened the power of political and religious authorities; the sharp increase in literacy broke the monopoly of the literate elite on education and learning and bolstered the emerging middle class. Across Europe, the increasing cultural self-awareness of its people led to the rise of proto-nationalism, accelerated by the flowering of the European vernacular languages to the detriment of Latin's status as lingua franca. In the 19th century, the replacement of the hand-operated Gutenberg-style press by steam-powered rotary presses allowed printing on an industrial scale, while Western-style printing was adopted all over the world, becoming practically the sole medium for modern bulk printing.

The use of movable type was a marked improvement on the handwritten manuscript, which was the existing method of book production in Europe, and upon woodblock printing, and revolutionized European book-making. Gutenberg's printing technology spread rapidly throughout Europe and later the world.

His major work, the Gutenberg Bible (also known as the 42-line Bible), has been acclaimed for its high aesthetic and technical quality.
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