



circa 1450

The printing press

A revolution in reproduction

For centuries, the residents of Haarlem (and the Netherlands) believed their own Laurens Janszoon Coster was the inventor of printing. There is even a huge statue of him on the Grote Markt (town square) in Haarlem. However, the story of Coster appears to have been a romantic invention. In reality, it was Johannes Gutenberg in the German city of Mainz who invented the printing of books with moveable type in around 1455, when he printed the world-famous Gutenberg Bible. (Incidentally, a type of printing existed in distant China as early as the eighth century.)

The predecessors of Gutenberg used a printing method known as block printing, in which one complete page was carved into a block of wood and then printed. However, carving each block took a great deal of time and the blocks had to be discarded after the printing of only one book. Gutenberg discovered how to set a text using loose lead letters. Once the letters were made, you could set a new

page quickly, and after printing the same letters could be reused.

Books could now be produced much more quickly than in the past. Whereas copyists needed months to copy a single book, now hundreds of copies could be printed in the same amount of time. Books were still expensive but were no longer only available to the elite few. The printing press also resulted in an explosion of printed material in all shapes and forms: a great many religious works were printed, but also simply-designed language and arithmetic books, travel journals and tales of knights in shining armour in prose form.

The first printers in the northern Netherlands were to be found in towns like Delft and Gouda. No printed material from the northern Low Countries has been found dating from earlier than 1473, and the first book in the Dutch language only appeared in 1477, the Delft Bible.

However, the cultural centre of gravity of the Low Countries had long been in

the south. Antwerp developed into an international trade metropolis in the first half of the sixteenth century and boasted a varied cultural life. The town was teeming with printers who were prepared to print anything as long as it sold. One of these men was Christoffel Plantijn, the founder of the most famous printer's in the Low Countries. His "Polyglot Bible" of 1573 was a scientific edition of the Bible in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek supplemented with Syrian and Latin translations and is regarded as one of the wonders of early printing.

After the fall of Antwerp (1585) many printers moved their workshops to the north. A century or so later, the Republic grew into a true printers' paradise where books could be printed that had been banned by governments or the church elsewhere. In the seventeenth century, more books were printed in the Republic than in the rest of Europe together. This phenomenon was referred to as the "Dutch Miracle".



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Sub-topics

Primary education sector

From goose quill to the printing press and then the keyboard

The life and work of Christoffel Plantijn

Technological inventions of great significance

Secondary education sector

An early printing shop: Gerard Leeu

The Delft Bible of 1477

Type-setting and printing techniques (up to e-books)

Bibliophilist printed matter

Forbidden books

Past and Present

Is the development of the internet just as revolutionary as the transition from handwritten manuscripts to printed books was in its day?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of digital texts as opposed to printed material?

In the Treasure Chest

Model of the Gutenberg printing press

Composing stick with loose lead letters

References

Places to Go

Antwerp: Plantijn Moretus (completely restored printer's workshop)

The Hague: Meermanno Museum

Mainz: Gutenberg Museum

Local traditional printers (www.drukwerkindemarge.nl)

Books for young people

Matthew Skelton, *Endymion Spring* (12+)

Renzo Rossi, *Het tijdperk van het boek* (12+ info)

Background literature

K.F. Treebus, *Tekstwijzer: Een gids voor het grafisch verwerken van tekst*, 's-Gravenhage 1990.

(By the same author: *Vormwijzer*, 1991)

Ed Schilders, *In-druk: Van Wiegedruk tot Graftchrift*, Tilburg 1995.

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www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/permanent/gutenberg/web/pgstns/01.html (Gutenberg Bible)