Gutenberg’s great achievement was in bringing together and perfecting the combination of moveable metal type, printing ink, and a wooden screw-press in order to make printing from type – as opposed to through the use of woodcut blocks – possible for the first time in the western world. The chief advantage of the printing press over manuscript production was its ability to produce in a short period of time a large number of identical copies of any given work. This led to the rapid dissemination of knowledge, to the forming of new communities of learning and scholarship, and eventually to the literate mass culture we know today.

Who was Gutenberg?

Johann Gutenberg (c.1400–68) was born in Mainz to Friele Gensfleisch and Else Wyrich, the daughter of a local burgher. ‘Gutenberg’ comes from the name of the house of his father and paternal ancestors. Sometime before 1430, Gutenberg left Mainz for Strasbourg due to political strife. There he initiated a partnership for the mass production of pilgrim’s souvenirs and it is presumed that Gutenberg was ordered to give up some or all of his printing equipment in the verdict (Fust went on to establish a successful printing shop with the partnership’s instrument (6 November 1455), a lawsuit was brought by Fust against Gutenberg for monies owed. The funds were most likely involved in printing the Bible, which was probably modeled after large screw presses used for making wine. The court evidently decided in Fust’s favour, and it is presumed that Gutenberg was ordered to give up some or all of his printing equipment in the verdict (Fust went on to establish a successful printing shop with the partnership’s leading assistant, the calligrapher Peter Schöffer).

Gutenberg’s great achievement was in bringing together and perfecting the combination of moveable metal type, printing ink, and a wooden screw-press in order to make printing from type – as opposed to through the use of woodcut blocks – possible for the first time in the western world. The chief advantage of the printing press over manuscript production was its ability to produce in a short period of time a large number of identical copies of any given work. This led to the rapid dissemination of knowledge, to the forming of new communities of learning and scholarship, and eventually to the literate mass culture we know today.

According to a document known as the Helmasperger Instrument (6 November 1455), a lawsuit was brought by Fust against Gutenberg for monies owed. The funds were most likely involved in printing the Bible, which was probably modeled after large screw presses used for making wine. The court evidently decided in Fust’s favour, and it is presumed that Gutenberg was ordered to give up some or all of his printing equipment in the verdict (Fust went on to establish a successful printing shop with the partnership’s leading assistant, the calligrapher Peter Schöffer).
The John Rylands Library

Augustinian inscription and discovery of the 1790 acquisition date allowing the Baillieu Library to quote from his findings regarding the Provenance of the copy at the John Rylands Library

Until recently, the earliest information about the copy of the Gutenberg Bible held by The John Rylands Library was that it was first described in a catalogue of the marvellous book collection owned by George Spencer, 2nd Earl Spencer (1729–1805), in 1790 for the total of £370 that he paid to the London bookseller Abraham Lichtstein (ed.), Horatia: a poem (London: W. and J. Crooke, 1789). One of the few 15th-century botanicans to publish extensively, Horatia practiced medicine and botany and devoted her life to the cultivation of medicinal plants as well as botanical research. Her knowledge of botany was based on the works of the naturalist Rembert Dodoens (1516–1585), who is known for his contributions to the study of botany and for his work on herbal medicine.

Psalmi Davidsis regis, & prophetarum, lingua syriaca... (London: Rembolt, 16 January 1498). The Baillieu Library holds a leaf from the Gutenberg Bible (c.1455) acquired by the Biblioteca Palatina in Mainz, Germany, in 1515, which is decorated with an illuminated, ornamental, and decorative design. It is one of the few surviving leaves from the Gutenberg Bible, and it is decorated with an illuminated manuscript page depicting the city of Mainz.

A history of the world from Creation to the late 15th century known for its woodcut illustrations, which includes a depiction of the city of Mainz, Gutenberg's birthplace, and where he established the first printing shop.

Two-volume Illustrated Bible produced by the artist Mary Moser, who was influenced by the Gutenberg Bible. Hortus sanitatis. Mainz: Jacob Meydenbach, 23 June 1491. A modified Latin translation of a Greek text, which functioned as an herbal and an encyclopaedia of natural and mythological plants, animals, and minerals.

A noble fragment: being a leaf from the Gutenberg Bible, 1450-1455... New York: Gallery of Illustrations, 1930. An example of the Gutenberg Bible, which is decorated with an illuminated manuscript page depicting the city of Mainz.

A well-known commentary on the Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon or Canticles, one of the books of the Old Testament.

Hartmann Schedel, Liber chronicarum (Nuremberg Chronicle) (Nuremberg: Hendriks, 1493; Special Collections, Baillieu Library, The University of Melbourne). An example of the Gutenberg Bible, which is decorated with an illuminated manuscript page depicting the city of Mainz.

Above: Initial ‘R’ at the start of the prologue to Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, courtesy of The University of Manchester; Woodcut depicting the city of Mainz from the Nuremberg Chronicle (Nuremberg, 1493), Special Collections, Baillieu Library, The University of Melbourne.

Location

Ground Floor

Baillieu Library

The University of Melbourne

Victoria 3010

Viewing hours are 11am to 5pm, daily including weekends. The final day is Sunday 27 July 2014

Admission is free

For more information: library.unimelb.edu.au/gutenberg