

The Gutenberg Bible

Biblia Latina (Bible, in Latin)

Mainz: Johannes Gutenberg, ca. 1455

Rare Book Division

As the cornerstone of printing in the West, the Gutenberg Bible has come to embody the technological and artistic achievements of Johannes Gutenberg (ca. 1398–1468) of Mainz, Germany. The mass printing of identical texts, which had hardly been possible before Gutenberg, greatly facilitated the spread of knowledge, increased literacy, and played a crucial role in the development of the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment, and the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions.

Gutenberg is credited as the first European to employ movable metal type in the production of books. This technology—coupled with his use of oil-based inks and a wooden, mechanical printing press—constituted a significant advance over handwriting and woodblock printing, the most common means of book production at that time. Gutenberg most likely completed work on the Bible by November 1455, at which time he lost his printing establishment through bankruptcy. Approximately 180 copies were printed; 48 are known to survive.

The New York Public Library's copy of the Bible, purchased in 1847 by American book collector James Lenox (who was later one of the library's co-founders), was the first to be brought to the Americas. The arrival in New York is the stuff of romantic legend: Lenox's agent persuaded the officers in the Customs House to remove their hats in seeing it, in honor of the achievements it represents.