Historical Figure: Johannes Gutenberg

Though many of the factual details of his life remain shrouded in mystery, the historical significance of Johannes Gutenberg’s achievement is beyond dispute. In his role as a diligent craftsman and an innovative entrepreneur he left a legacy that shaped the course of Western history. His invention – the printing press and the mass production of books – introduced a new age: the era of reading, rationalism, and logical discourse. No wonder historians and cultural analysts have dubbed him “The Man of the Millennium.”

Johannes (or Henne) Gensfleisch zur Laden was born in Mainz, Germany around the year 1400, son of Friele Gensfleisch (a cloth merchant or metal worker) and Else Wyrich (daughter of an aristocratic house). Among the prosperous merchants of Mainz names did not automatically pass from father to son; and in view of the meaning of Gensfleisch in the German language – “Gooseflesh” – it is perhaps not surprising that Johannes elected to adopt the surname Gutenberg (“Goodhill”) after an estate in the possession of his mother’s family.

Little is known about Gutenberg’s childhood and early life. The sons of patrician families usually attended one of Mainz’s seminaries or convent schools, and it is likely that his academic training followed this pattern. He may also have spent some time as a student at the University of Erfurt, alma mater of the Mainz archdiocese. Whatever his formal educational background, it is certain that he eventually became involved with the mechanical arts, attaining considerable knowledge in the fields of metalworking, goldsmithing, and gem-polishing.

Records indicate that by 1430 Gutenberg had moved out of Mainz, possibly in reaction to disputes between the patricians and the trade guilds, and migrated to the town of Strasburg, where he quickly made profitable use of his practical skills. He joined the goldsmiths’ guild, established a manufacturing business, acquired pupils and associates, and busied himself with gem-polishing and the production of small looking-glasses. He also began to experiment with movable typography and the development of oil-based inks.

We now suspect that Gutenberg was not the first European to make trial of this method of printing. Some sources indicate that Laurens Coster of the Netherlands may have produced a book from movable type as early as 1430. The Chinese and Koreans, of course, had anticipated Europeans in this field by as much as two or three hundred years. But oriental scripts, which employ thousands of distinct characters, were not compatible with the technique; and Gutenberg’s Western precursors, whoever they may have been, failed somehow to impress their contemporaries with the significance of their mechanical
tinkerings. It would be up to Gutenberg to take the art of printing to the next level: commercial success and wide-scale cultural impact. This is precisely what he did; and to the extent that he succeeded we are justified in regarding him as “inventor of the printing press” and “Man of the Millennium.”

By 1448 Gutenberg was back in Mainz, recruiting investors and borrowing capital. In due course he set up a printing workshop and began taking on small jobs such as schoolbooks and Latin grammars. Eventually he succeeded in securing a partnership with Johannes Fust, a wealthy merchant and moneylender. Over the next three to four years Fust loaned Gutenberg more than 2,000 guilders for the production of books, thus enabling him to begin production on the most ambitious of all his printing projects: the famous Gutenberg Bible (also known as the Mazarin Bible or the 42-line Bible, for the number of lines in each column). This two-volume work, completed in 1455 in an edition of about 180 copies, is the earliest extant Western book printed with movable type.

Though Gutenberg’s talents as an artist, technician, and innovator cannot be doubted, questions remain as to his competency as a businessman and money manager. Certainly he could not have launched his Mainz printing endeavor without careful planning and excellent organizational skills; and yet he conspicuously failed to turn the venture into a financial success. Before the Gutenberg Bible could be finished, there was a falling out between Gutenberg and Fust. The investor accused the printer of embezzling. He demanded his money back with interest. When Gutenberg was unable to pay, Fust sued, winning possession of the shop, the equipment, and half of the printed Bibles. Fust completed the printing of the Bible with the help of Gutenberg’s co-worker Peter Schoffer.

Somehow Gutenberg found a way to get back on his feet and re-establish his business interests. But the lawsuit had taken its toll. In the years that followed he sustained himself by accepting quick and easy commissions – leaflets, pamphlets, medical calendars, and inventories – but the quality of these items never measured up to the technical and aesthetic excellence of the Gutenberg Bible. Fortunately, his accomplishments did not go entirely unnoticed during his lifetime. In 1465, the Archbishop of Mainz honored Gutenberg with a letter of commendation, appointed him to the archiepiscopal court, and gave him a stipend: a suit of clothes, 2,180 liters of grain, and 2,000 liters of wine every year. Thus Gutenberg was enabled to live out his final years in a measure of material comfort and security. He died on February 3, 1468 and was buried in the church of St. Francis.

Whatever his skills as a practical businessman may have been, one thing is certain: Gutenberg was a man of great vision and foresight – a dedicated artisan who was driven by passionate convictions about the significance of his work. As he saw it, his invention was more than a machine: it was a veritable fountain of truth and spiritual nourishment:

Yes, it is a press, certainly, but a press from which shall flow in inexhaustible streams the most abundant and most marvelous liquor that has ever flowed to relieve the thirst of men. Through it, God will spread His Word; a spring of truth shall flow from it; like a
new star it shall scatter the darkness of ignorance and become a cause of light hitherto unknown to shine among men.

As glowing and ambitious as this prediction was, there is an important sense in which it falls short of the reality. For in perfecting the technique of printing by movable type Gutenberg bequeathed something to European culture above and beyond the gift of ready access to the words of God and man. In the process he also laid the foundation of a mindset that was to dominate the Western world for the next five centuries. As author Neil Postman explains,

"From Erasmus in the sixteenth century to Elizabeth Eisenstein in the twentieth, almost every scholar who has grappled with the question of what reading does to one’s habits of mind has concluded that the process encourages rationality; that the sequential, propositional character of the written word fosters what Walter Ong calls the ‘analytic management of knowledge.’"¹

To put it another way, by establishing a culture of typography (Postman’s term), Gutenberg made possible the development of a psychological context in which questions about logic, truth, and reality became increasingly meaningful and relevant. The practical results in terms of philosophical inquiry and scientific endeavor are beyond calculation.

This mindset is, of course, rapidly dissipating in our day. And it is at least arguable that this breakdown is the direct result of yet another epoch-making cultural shift: the displacement of the culture of typography by the rising culture of visual imagery.