



Affiliate 133

# PHILATELI-GRAPHICS

QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE GRAPHICS PHILATELY ASSOCIATION

ISSN 9739-6198



Study Unit

VOLUME XXV, NUMBER 4 - WHOLE NUMBER 101 - OCTOBER 2003

## It Got Started with Gutenberg: Early Printing History as Theme and Topic *by David L. Straight*

As collectors of printed products, the history and technology of printing seem a natural topic for stamp collectors. Many nations have issued stamps to commemorate significant printing anniversaries; the illustrations of presses and pages provide a window onto the technology and craftsmanship of printing (illustration below).



**China**, 1 December 1962 [Sc639]. Ts'ai Lun, credited with inventing papermaking while an official in the court of Eastern Han Emperor Ho Ti.

Our story begins in ancient China with the invention of paper by Ts'ai Lun (left) in 105 A.D. While the oldest surviving paper, made from rags, dates from approximately 150 A.D., the first paper was probably made from the bark of mulberry trees. Paper making technology (right) moved slowly across Asia into the Middle East. Around 1150 A.D., the Moors built a paper mill in Spain; from this introduction, the technology spread throughout Europe. The invention of movable type, in the mid-15th century, increased the demand for paper.



**China**, 1 December 1962 [Sc 640]. An early Chinese paper factory.

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**Finland**, 18 May 1985 [Sc706a-h]. A magnificently printed booklet pane of eight stamps features a collection of Finnish Banknotes commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Bank of Finland Security Printing House, also the printer for Finnish stamps. The six notes in the center were designed by the famous Finnish-American architect Eliel Saarinen. Illustration shown at 67%.



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**Yugoslavia**, 29 Sept 1940 [Sc159]. Cover produced in 1940 to celebrate the 500th anniversary—at least a decade too early—of Gutenberg’s invention of movable type. In the cachet printed across the top of the envelope, Gutenberg is flanked by 16th century and 20th century printing presses. The central image portrayed on the 5.50 dinar stamp is the historic old bridge at Obod, the first town in Yugoslavia to have a printing press.

Johannes Gutenberg (above and below), a goldsmith from Mainz, invented movable type—individual metal letters cast in uniform size that could be used over and over again in different combinations to print text on paper. Gutenberg produced his seminal work, the 42-line Bible (so called because each page consists of two columns of text, 42 lines each) between 1450 and 1455. Many details of Gutenberg's life have been lost. A few surviving court papers that document his indebtedness and business struggles provide most of what we know about his life. To satisfy debts, Gutenberg's shop was taken by Johann Fust, who in turn allowed Peter Schöffer, his son-in-law, to operate it. In 1457, Fust and Schöffer published the Mainz Psalter, the first book to carry a publication date and the names of the printers. Some claim that this pair, not Gutenberg, are responsible for the Bible. Gutenberg's shadowy history has led to a wide range of issue dates for stamps commemorating his

work—Germany in 1954, the United States in 1952, but Yugoslavia issued a 500th anniversary commemorative (above) in 1940.

After Gutenberg, printing technology spread quickly throughout Europe. By 1500, printing presses had operated in 236 towns across 18 countries. The greatest concentrations were in Italy, Germany, France, Spain, and Holland. Although the time division is somewhat arbitrary, collectors call books from this first half century of printing “Incunabula,” from the Latin meaning “thing in the cradle.” It is

**West Germany**, 5 May 1954 [Sc723]. Stamp celebrates the 500th anniversary of Johannes Gutenberg of Mainz and the first European books produced using his movable type. (A screened-back version of this stamp image appears as overall background of this article’s first page.)



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**Spain**, 11 December 1973 [Sc1792-1793]. This pair of stamps depicts images from 15th-century Spanish books—a title page from *Los Sinodales* printed in Segovia in 1472 (above), and a woodcut of a classroom from *Libros de los Suenos*, printed in Valencia in 1474 (below).



**Sweden**, 10 February 1983 [Sc1448-1452]. Booklet pane marks 500 years of Swedish printing.

estimated that 12 million Incunabula, in 35,000 different editions, were printed and distributed.

Printers trained in the shops of Germany carried printing technology to many other cities as they sought to establish businesses of their own. Although working in a distinctive Spanish style, German printers produced the first books at Segovia in 1472 and Valencia in 1474 (above left). Printers from Lübeck, Germany brought the art to Baltic cities and Scandinavia, arriving in Sweden in 1483. The Swedish Post commemorated five centuries of printing with a booklet (above) in 1983.

William Caxton, an Englishman living in Belgium, printed the first English book in 1475. The following

**Great Britain**, 29 September 1976 [Sc796]. Image from work published by William Caxton from a set of four stamps marking 500 years of printing in Great Britain.



year he moved the press to Westminster, near the Abbey. By his death in 1491, Caxton had printed nearly 100 titles including a few of his own translations (right). Unlike the continental printers who worked extensively in Latin or Greek, Caxton printed primarily in English.

The printing press went hand in hand with church reformation in the 15th & 16th centuries, especially the translation and distribution of the Scriptures in the vernacular languages, rather than Latin. A translation of the Old Testament, known as the Delft Bible (below), was published in 1477. While not the first printing in the Netherlands, it was the first book published in Dutch.



**Netherlands**, 8 March 1977 [Sc568]. A passage from the Book of Job with “db” in lead type mark the 500th anniversary of the Delft Bible—the first book printed in Dutch. Label explains stamp design and purpose.

Among the least known Incunabula is the Oktioh of Cetinje, an orthodox liturgical book of hymns in eight parts, printed at the castle of Obod (see illustration, previous page). In their mountain stronghold, the people of Montenegro were never subdued by the Turks and preserved their orthodox faith throughout the Ottoman occupation of the Balkans. In 1493, Prince George Tsernoievitj ordered Cyrillic type cast in Venice, the center of Italian printing, and hired a monk to produce religious service books in the Slavic Glagolitic alphabet (right).



**Montenegro**, - 1893 [Sc28]. This 15-novcic stamp from a set of nine 1893 overprints recalling the 400th anniversary of the introduction of printing in Montenegro.

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(Left) **Iceland**, 29 November 1984 [Sc597-598]. Pair of stamps depicts an illustrated capital and frontispiece from the first Icelandic Bible. (Middle) **Peru**, 23 October 1985 [Sc862]. Stamp shows the frontispiece from *Doctrina Christiana*, the first book printed in South America in 1585. (Right) **Mexico**, 1 September 1939 [Sc748-750 & C97-99]. Stamps depicting 16th century printing milestones, including the first printer's shop in Mexico and the first engraving created in Mexico.

As printing spread not only to the farthest corners of Europe, but also to Asia and the New World during the 16th century, many of the initial publications were religious. The Icelanders were able to read the Bible (above left) in their native tongue in 1584. In order to provide religious instruction for the native peoples, printing presses were in the vanguard of Spanish colonization of the New World. In the United States we often forget that Spanish priests established printing and higher education in Mexico City (above right) and Lima, Peru (above center) during the century before these reached Massachusetts.

The importance of education to the Puritans is reflected by the speed with which printing was

brought to Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1639, only nine years after it was founded, locksmith Stephen Daye was hired by Rev. Jose Glover to operate the first press in the English colonies at Cambridge, seat of the college that later became Harvard, itself formed three years earlier by the General Court of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Daye printed *The Oath of a Free-Man* and an almanac. Although separated by nearly 200 years, Daye's press would seem very familiar technology to Gutenberg.

A version of this article was first published in "A Specialty Guide to Topicals," Supplement #30 to *Stamp Collector* and is reprinted with the permission and assistance of the author.



**United States**, 25 September 1939 [Sc857]. First-day cover for the 3¢ commemorative honoring the 300th anniversary of printing in the United States. Stamp is illustrated with Stephen Daye's printing press