

The Gutenberg Museum: “World Museum of the Art of Printing”

RALPH STANTON takes us to the city of Mainz, Germany,
and into a galaxy of printing history.

OF ALL THE “museums of the book,” the Gutenberg Museum provides the best overall picture of the development of the printing arts. It also succeeds in placing Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in the context of human written communications, including manuscript books and other pre-movable type forms.

I have had the pleasure of two visits to this wonderful museum, situated in the pleasant city of Mainz at the confluence of the Main and Rhine rivers, just a half-hour drive from Frankfurt International Airport. Mainz traces its origins to a Roman fort established on the northern frontier of the Roman Empire in the first century BCE. However, it is most renowned as the place where Johannes Gutenberg was born (shortly before 1400, by most accounts), carried out his mature work and died in 1468. The city was home to about 6,000 people in the 1400s, but today it has a population of about 200,000.

It is curious that the city of Mainz did not remember its most illustrious son with a museum in his name until 1901, when it allocated two modest rooms in the municipal library for the purpose. At about the same time the Internationale Gutenberg-Gesellschaft (International Gutenberg Society) was founded to support the museum and quickly attracted about 700 members from all over the world.

RISING FROM THE ASHES OF WORLD WAR II

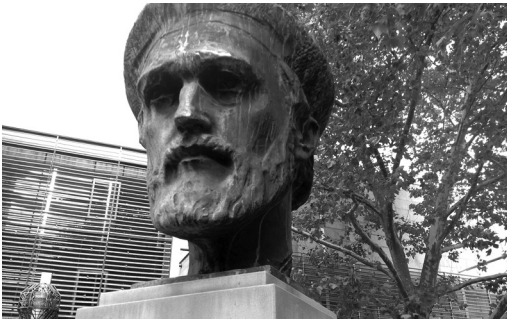
The First World War froze the growth of the new institution, but the museum was fortunate. Significant changes that put the museum on a firm footing for the future took place in 1920 when the city ceded two old patrician houses, the Römischen Kaiser (Voltaire, Goethe and Mozart all visited the house) and the König von England, to the museum. The city appointed Aloys Ruppel to oversee the museum and its growing



*The Gutenberg Museum in Mainz, Germany.
(Ralph Stanton photo)*

library, and that same year acquired a partial copy of Gutenberg’s greatest work, the 42-line Bible (*the Gutenberg Bible* of popular renown). Ruppel proved adept at tracking down the owners of old type foundries and printing shops and acquiring printing equipment of historical importance, and he would serve as “Gutenberg’s deputy on Earth” for 42 eventful years.

Ruppel was instrumental in the creation in 1926 of the *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch*. This annual publication of the International Gutenberg Society covers writing, printing and book production from a scientific perspective; it features about 30 articles variously in German, English, French, Spanish and Italian, in keeping with the global orientation of the society. The editorial and production standards of this publication are second to none. It is published as a hard-cover quarto on high-quality paper with different typefaces used every year. The dust jacket is the result of an annual competition and is always exceptional. The present editor is Stephan Füssel of the Gutenberg University of Mainz. Considering the extraordinary quality of this publication, the



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*The sculpted head of Johannes Gutenberg
on the grounds of the Gutenberg Museum.
(Ralph Stanton photo)*

membership fee of the society at €60 (or about \$90; half-price for students) is modest indeed.

With the 1930s came the rise of Nazism, and Ruppel was accused of having an “un-German and pro-Jewish book acquisition policy.” Ruppel’s international approach, especially as it related to the *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* (a necessity given the nature of the printing industry), garnered the museum a visit from a commission of the Reich Chamber of Literature in 1936. Ruppel survived the investigation, but one can imagine the challenges of developing a museum dedicated to the book when one’s political masters were more often interested in starting bonfires of books.

But fire came not only from Berlin, but also from the skies. During the Second World War, the industrial importance of Mainz attracted no less than 30 bombing raids, which destroyed 80 percent of the city. One of the last, in February 1945, seriously damaged the Römischen Kaiser and burnt the library. Fortunately, the museum’s most valuable holdings had been evacuated and were spared.

The war had reduced the pre-war membership of the society from 1,400 to just 400 members. During the post-war era, the French occupation authorities showed goodwill toward the museum and it began to recover. Its membership surpassed pre-war totals by the end of the 1950s. On a gift of land located just behind its old headquarters and donations of 5 million marks—2 million from the public and 3 million from the city—an attractive modern concrete-and-glass museum building was completed in 1962. This building was updated and modestly extended in 2000.

THE GREATEST ACQUISITION

The museum’s greatest acquisition occurred in 1978 when it secured a complete Gutenberg Bible, one of 48 surviving copies. Austrian-born New York book dealer Hans Peter Kraus was the linchpin of the transaction. The acquisition—and the associated plotting and politics that made it possible—represented an outstanding accomplishment for the museum and the small city of Mainz.

Since 1968 the society and city have offered the Gutenberg Prize, which recognizes outstanding artistic, technical or academic achievements related to printing. Past winners include many names familiar to Alcuin Society members, including Veronese printer Giovanni Mardersteig, typeface designer (and Society member) Hermann Zapf, incunabulum researcher Lotte Hellinga-Querido, typographer John Dreyfus, and book historians Henri-Jean Martin, Robert Darnton and Elizabeth Eisenstein.

Despite its central role in explaining the development and impact of the most important technology of the past millennium, the museum has expanded only modestly in the past 20 years. As a municipal museum (the mayor of Mainz is also president of the International Gutenberg Society), it has not recently shared the same level of state and federal largesse that has built or expanded so many other German museums.

In his annual letter to members in December 2013, Mainz’s energetic mayor, Michael Ebling, noted that the museum staff were working on a study for a substantial expansion of the museum via an international architecture contest. The museum has already demonstrated its capacity to tell the story of print but now Mainz needs, and surely deserves, more support from the state and national governments.

WHAT YOU WILL SEE

The present museum is located a few blocks from the Rhine and opposite Der Hohe Dom zu Mainz—St. Martin’s Cathedral. It is now home to two Gutenberg Bibles (located in a special vault but easily accessible) and a working model of the Gutenberg press. The museum provides a comprehensive survey of the development of the book through the



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Stained-glass windows in St. Martin's Cathedral devoted to Adolf II von Nassau and Diether von Isenburg, rival bishops of Mainz. (Ralph Stanton photo)

early period of printing; the development of Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo printing; the flowering of printing with rising literacy and the steam-powered press in the 19th century; and all the diverse trends of the 20th century.

All these periods are illustrated with some of the finest examples of printed books you could ever wish to see, many borrowed from important German libraries, especially the Stadtbibliothek Mainz. You will see many old presses: Koenig's automatic cylinder press of 1814, the first rotary press, as well as other tools of the book-related trades. In addition, you will learn about the lives of the printers themselves. While Gutenberg takes pride of place as the great inventor, opening elements of the exhibition place due emphasis on the important contributions of his partners Johann Fust and Peter Schöffer.

Special sections focus on paper production and watermarks, bookbinding (the German Bookbinders' Collection), posters, advertising, bookplates, books for children, graphic illustration techniques (woodblock, copperplate, steel engraving, etc.). And there is more: a section on script and printing in East Asia that shows woodblocks and movable metal type being used in China and Korea before Europe adopted such printing; and a fascinating section on the development of notation, from ancient cuneiform, hieroglyphics and the Phoenician alphabetic script to the emergence of Hebrew, Greek and Roman script. A special treat is a history of calligraphy in the Islamic world (the scripts are especially beautiful) and a section on the history of writing in Europe. A space

for temporary exhibitions featured, during my most recent visit, an exhibition of bookplates on the themes of theatre, film, music and dance.

A visit to the museum requires a full morning, lunch in the museum restaurant, and a return in the afternoon for a second look and a visit to the museum shop. A look into the Römischen Kaiser, where the administration, restoration workshop, library and the offices of the International Gutenberg Society are located, wouldn't be out of order.

St. Martin's, opposite the museum, features stained-glass windows that name the bishops of Mainz. Of particular interest are the windows devoted to Adolf II von Nassau and Diether von Isenburg, the rival bishops of Gutenberg's era. Adolf is particularly notorious for having waged war against Mainz, which resulted in the deaths of 600 citizens and the exile of Gutenberg and other printers. Yet from such a horrific chapter in the city's history came good: by exiling the printers, Adolf spread printing to many other centres.

If you have time make a side trip to nearby Eltville, a small and charming town on the opposite side of the Rhine where you can see the house of Gutenberg's mother, Friele, and walk where Gutenberg did as a boy. Mainz is close to Frankfurt, Germany's large financial centre, and the location of other excellent museums and galleries.

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