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**On this day in 1452, the first section of the [Gutenberg Bible](#) was finished in Mainz, Germany, by the printer Johannes Gutenberg.** Little is known of Gutenberg's early history or his personal life except that he was born around the year 1400, the youngest son of a wealthy merchant. But from the time of the appearance of his beautiful Bibles, he has left an indelible mark on human culture.

Ancient books had primarily been written on scrolls, though an innovation in the second century A.D. — that of the codex, a sheaf of pages bound at one edge — gave us the familiar book form we recognize today. Early codices were produced by hand by monks in scriptoriums, working with pen and ink, copying manuscripts one page at a time so that even a small book would take months to complete and a book the size of the Bible, rich with color and illuminations, would take years.

Gutenberg's genius was to separate each element of the beautiful, calligraphic blackletter script commonly used by the scribes into its most basic components — lowercase and capital letters, punctuation, and the connected ligatures that were standard in Medieval calligraphy — nearly 300 different shapes that were then each cast in quantity and assembled to form words, lines, and full pages of text. He also invented a printing press to use his type, researching and refining his equipment and processes over the course of several years. In 1440, Gutenberg wrote and printed copies of his own mysteriously titled book, *Kunst und Aventura* [*Art and Enterprise*], releasing his printing ideas to the public, and by 1450 his movable-type printing press was certainly in operation.

It is unclear when Gutenberg conceived of his Bible project, though he was clearly in production by 1452. He probably produced about 180 copies — 145 that were printed on handmade paper imported from Italy and the remainder on more luxurious and expensive vellum. Once complete, the Bibles were sold as folded sheets, the owners responsible for having them bound and decorated, so that each surviving copy has its own unique features like illumination, dashes of color, marks of ownership, and notes and marginalia.

Only four dozen Gutenberg Bibles remain, and of these only 21 are complete, but what Gutenberg created went far beyond the reach of those volumes. By beginning the European printing revolution, he forever changed how knowledge was spread, democratized learning, and allowed for thoughts and ideas to be widely disseminated throughout the known world. In his time, Gutenberg's contemporaries called this “the art of multiplying books” and it was a major catalyst for the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and even the Protestant Reformation. In 1997, *Time Magazine* named Johannes Gutenberg “Man of the Millennium” and dubbed his movable type as the most important invention of a thousand years. His name is commemorated by Project Gutenberg, a group of volunteers working to digitize and archive cultural and literary works, while making them open and free to the public, and was even placed in the skies as a the planetoid Gutemberga.

As Mark Twain wrote in 1900, in a congratulatory letter to mark the opening of the Gutenberg Museum in Mainz, “What the world is today, good and bad, it owes to Gutenberg. Everything

can be traced to this source, but we are bound to bring him homage ... for the bad that his colossal invention has brought about is overshadowed a thousand times by the good with which mankind has been favored.”