

The 15th Century

In the 15th century, the printed book was the first product to be truly exported to the whole known world at that time. Conceived in Germany in the mid-15th century, the printed book was soon perfected in Italy, and that country, with Venice and other centres, became the market leader for a century and a half. Binding embellished the product, which was also appreciated for its external beauty. The invention of printing also had a major impact on European culture, facilitating literacy and helping to standardise the language habits of nations. Printed books in Latin, which had been the language of the classics and authorities, began to coexist with printed books in local languages.

The first printed books in spoken languages also gave an insight into the tastes of social classes who, although they did not know Latin, could read, write and buy books.

The ancient book has also become the bearer of other stories, as various traces have been left on its pages over the centuries: traces that today turn the study of a single copy into a kind of mystery novel.

With police intuition, it is possible to pick up many clues that need to be deciphered and lead to a solution. Over the centuries, readers who came into possession of a copy made their own notes on it, just as we do today in the margins of paperback books or on parchment covers. Such notes reveal many aspects, sometimes tracing the history of a family and details that have remained unknown, sometimes interweaving names and various quotations, thus creating a kind of "hypertext". The result of these operations increases the communicative value of the book, which is no longer just the content printed on its pages, but also the historical context and meanings that surround it. Today, we think of web page links as a 21st century invention, but this is not the case. The study of notes, or how books were noted, is the most innovative aspect not only of book history but of cultural history in general, because it allows us to understand the cultural context of a specific period, the circulation of ideas, the processes by which new ideas were generated.

In a short time, the book also became the first design object invented by Italians. The great graphic designers of the twentieth century were more or less consciously inspired by the Renaissance book layout, which was based on precise rules such as the Golden Ratio, the relationship between black and white parts and between text and images. The history of Italian and European graphic design began with the foundries and typographies of the Renaissance.

