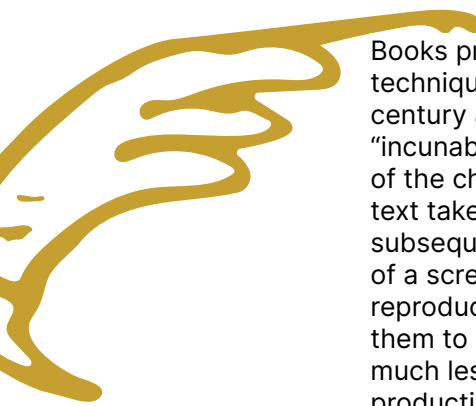


Incunabula

Movable type printing in Europe was invented in the mid-15th century between Mainz and Strasbourg by Johann Gensfleisch zum Gutenberg (1394?-1468). The novelty of replacing the pen with reusable metal types simplified the reproduction of identical texts.

A true revolution began that affected not only the cultural sphere, but also social and economic life throughout the world: the production of multiple copies from a single matrix. To quote Francis Bacon, one of the inventions that altered **“the face and the state of the world”**.



Books printed using this innovative technique (between the mid-15th century and 1500 inclusive) are called “incunabula”. Thanks to the arrangement of the characters in a frame, in which the text takes shape but in negative, and the subsequent printing of a sheet by means of a screw press, it became possible to reproduce dozens of copies a day, allowing them to circulate at a lower cost and in much less time than that required for the production of manuscripts.

The very term incunabulum (from the humanist Latin incunabulum, meaning “cradle”) evokes the beginning of a new era, even if it is still unable to dissociate itself from its predecessor, the manuscript code (codex).

The incunabulum took the content from the codex: since there was no widespread “original” production of books, classical texts from the Roman and Greek periods were actually copied and translated into Latin. Incunabula also reflected the writing of ancient texts (“The same terms used in the art of typography refer to the world of the manuscript: scribere, style, etc.”).

Movable type initially took the form of an old script (Gutenberg himself used Gothic when he printed the 42-line Bible, the first incunabulum, between 1453 and 1455); the frontispiece was introduced a few decades later as the source of major typographic and publishing information.

Indeed, in the incunabulum, the title and author were included in the incipit of the text, while the typographic and publishing notes were included in the colophon, placed at the end of the text.

The incunabula preserved in different parts of the world are recorded in the Incunabula Short Title Catalogue (ISTC): the international database of 15th-century European printed books, created by the British Library (which also includes the volumes of San Marino State Library).

The data recorded in the ISTC includes authors, short titles, language of the text, places and dates of printing, printers, format and typeface.

Linked to the ISTC is MEI (Material Evidence in Incunabula), a database specifically designed to record and search information on the origin, ownership, decoration, binding, manuscript notes and stamps of 15th-century printed books.

Ancient books can still have an impact on the present. The relationship between the texts of past centuries and the creative expressions of today is still vibrant. An ancient book can be seen as a hypertext, a collection of cultural references with dynamics similar to those of today's web pages. Many of the incunabula and fifteeners have a close relationship with 20th century graphics and contemporary design.

The volumes on display not only represent various aspects of human knowledge, but also tell the history, through the notes made by the owners, signs and drawings, covers and bindings, of the territory (as far as the incunabula in the State Library are concerned) and of the collector Morris N. Young, whose precious collection on memory and mnemonics is now kept in the Library of the University of San Marino.

Antique books, our silent interlocutors and comites latentes, “hidden friends”, to use Petrarch's words, tell us the history and memory of our country, becoming historical sources themselves, not necessarily for their textual content, but for all those precious and distant elements, in space and time, they enshrine.