

No. 3 • September 1997

Lehigh University
Information Resources

Special Collections

Flyer

Cradle Printing

Many of you have heard of the term “incunabula”, or its English equivalent “incunable”, and perhaps know that it has something to do with early printing. But you may not understand its precise meaning, or why the term is important. The purpose of this SPECIAL COLLECTIONS *Flyer* is to answer these questions, and to give some examples from among the more than two dozen books in Lehigh’s Special Collections to which this term is applied. (References to the individual figures are on the back.)

“Incunabula” is a Latin word which means roughly “something from the cradle.” The Germans, in fact, use the term “Wiegendrucke,” which is an exact translation of the English in the header. It is used to refer to printed books from the period from the invention of printing to 50 years after, i.e. from about 1455 through 1500. This is a particularly important period for printed books because it represents the transition from the features of manuscript books, which were often imitated by early printers, to those we expect in a modern book, such as title pages, pagination, and indexes. Nearly all of these changes took place in the approximately 50 years under discussion here.

Published occasionally by Special Collections, Lehigh University Information Resources, Linderman Library, 30 Library Drive, Bethlehem, Pa. 18015-3067. To be placed on our mailing list, please write to the above address or send e-mail to inspc@lehigh.edu. Copies are also available, in pdf and html file formats, at World Wide Web site www.lib.lehigh.edu/spec.coll/spec.coll.html. Your comments and suggestions are always appreciated.

What were some of the features which printed books developed during that period that manuscript books didn’t have? The most obvious is the title page, which is not necessary when the number of books is small and no two are absolutely alike. Manuscript books are generally identified by the first line or two of the text, called the “incipit,” and information about production appears not at all, or else at the end of the text. Early printers copied these practices, but by 1500 the title page had all but completely assumed these functions.

Many manuscript books are numbered by the leaf, or not numbered at all, but since even the same passage of the same text will be on different leaves in different copies, it would not be possible to make a reference that would be of use to someone else. Such references were one of the main advantages of printed books to scholars. Two widely separated readers could cite a page number and communicate knowing they were referring to the same place in the text.

On the other hand, incunabula, at least the earliest ones, often left room for the fancy painted initials which were sometimes a feature of manuscript books. These and other decorative features were eventually

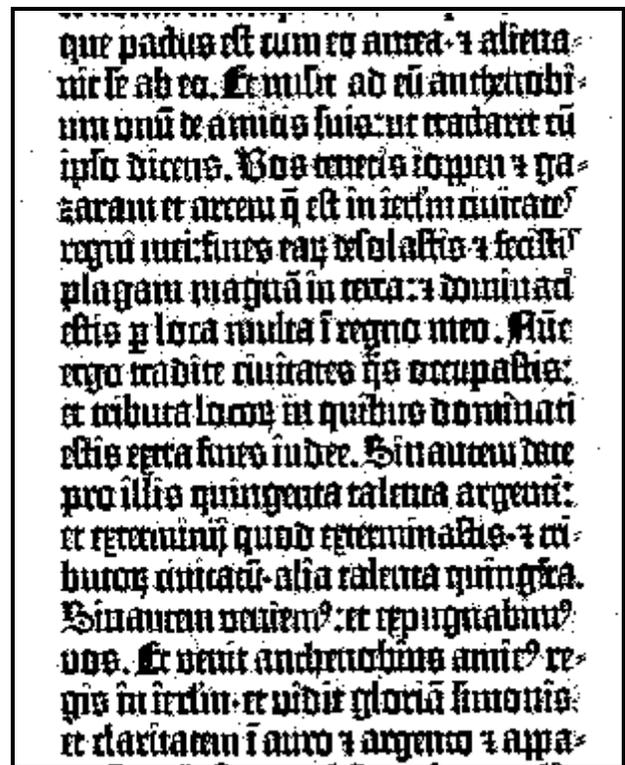


Figure 1

replaced through mechanical means, or else dropped entirely.

One of the most striking examples of printed books imitating manuscripts is to be found in the first printed book, Johann Gutenberg’s celebrated Bible of about 1455. (The book contains nei-ther a date of

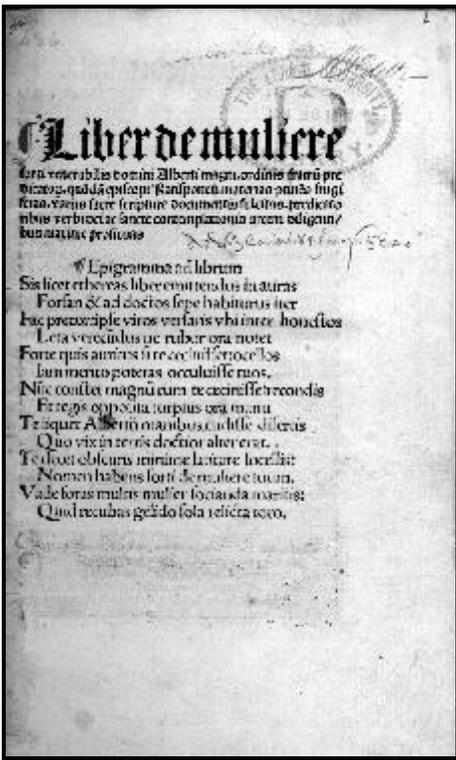


Figure 2

intention was to make his new product look as much like what people were used to (just as an imitation wood-grain laminate table makes a new material look like an old one). Similarly, such common apparatus in modern books as indexes would have been of little use when each copy of a text had a different format.

Figure 1. A section of the single leaf of the Gutenberg Bible in Special Collections. The text is from I Maccabees 15,16. [*Biblia sacra*. Mainz: Johann Gutenberg, ca. 1455]

Figure 2. This is a somewhat rudimentary example of a title page, which has a title, but no information about where or when published, or by whom. This is still contained in a colophon at the end. [Albertus Magnus (attributed). *Liber de muliere*. Cologne: Heinrich Quentell, 1499]

Figure 3. A colophon giving the date and place of printing and the name of the printer. It appears as the final paragraph on the last page of the book. The work was completed on the 8th of March 1476. [Leonardo Bruni. *Historia florentina*. Venice: J. de Rossi, 1476]

Figure 4. An example of a richly decorated initial leaf. The text is printed, but the initial letter and flourishes were supplied by hand in red and blue. [Jacobus Magnus. *Sophilogium*. Strassburg, ca. 1476]

ÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉ

publication nor the name of the printer.) Special Collections does not possess an original example of this book. Fewer than 50 exist today. However, we do have an original leaf, and a very accurate facsimile reproduction.

A careful examination of either one will show numerous variant and joined letters, normal in a manuscript book, but something which was complicated and expensive to reproduce mechanically. Gutenberg's obvious

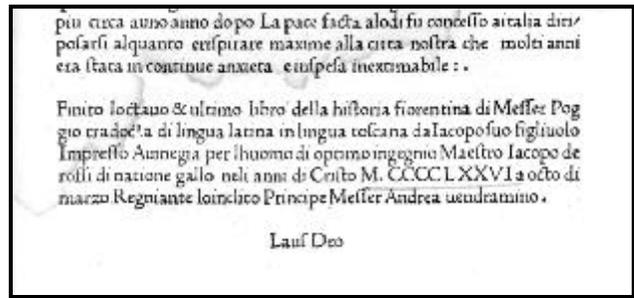


Figure 3

ÉÉÉÉ

On September 26th, the Lehigh University Art Galleries' new facilities in the Zoellner Arts Center will officially open. Special Collections is pleased to have a case of its materials in the permanent gallery. The exhibition includes a volume of Audubon's *Birds of America*, along with 8 other books illustrating the role of books in physical and intellectual exploration. The gallery will be open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Saturday and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday.

ÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉÉ
ÉÉÉÉ

Special Collections materials are available for research without restriction. For further information contact Philip A. Metzger, Curator. Reading room hours are Monday through Friday, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. or by appointment. Telephone: (610) 758-4506; fax (610) 974-6471; e-mail: inspc@lehigh.edu.

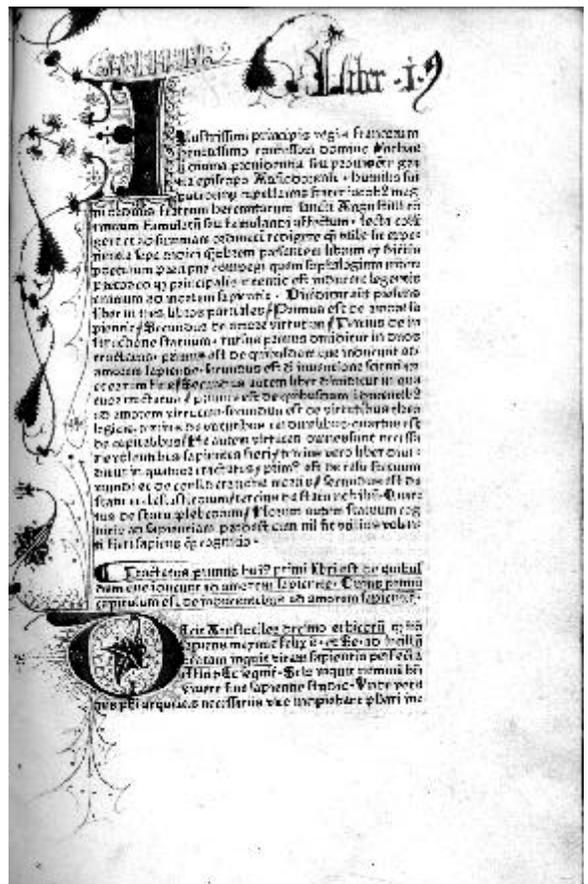


Figure 4