

Mainz City Tour: Tracing Gutenberg's Footsteps

Duration: Approximately 1 hour

Departure point: Liebfrauenplatz

Points of Interest:

1. The Lettern Memorial
2. The St. Martin's Cathedral Cloister
3. The Aschaffenberg House
4. The Gutenberg Memorial on Gutenberg Square
5. The Old University – Burial Site
6. The Gutenberg Hof – his Birthplace
7. Baptismal site at St. Christopher's Church – Algesheimer Hof
8. The Korb and Humbrechts houses – Press house
9. Gutenberg Museum

The Story of Henne Gensfleisch zur Laden, later called Johannes Gutenberg

Johannes Gutenberg was born around 1400 in Mainz but was actually named Henne Gensfleisch zur Laden. His exact birth year is not known but 1400 is in all likelihood probably accurate. Because Gutenberg was born into a highly-regarded patrician family, he was given lessons in reading, arithmetic, writing and Latin while very young. Other than that, almost nothing else is known about the youngster. It can be proven that from 1434 on, Gutenberg lived in Strassburg. There is no evidence whatever that he already experimented there with "the black art" of printing as it was then called. More likely, he gave lessons in polishing rare stones and founded an association or guild for the production of pilgrim's mirrors.

From 1448 on it can be proven that Gutenberg was once again back in his city of birth, Mainz. According to what's come down to us, he installed his first press in the house in which he was born, "House Gutenberg." Using two credit loans, each for more than 800 Gulden, provided him by Johannes Fust, Gutenberg expanded his printing house. Fust was a shareholder in the business. Now the stage was set for publishing the 42-section or type-block Bible which was produced in 1455. A disagreement regarding money arose between Fust and Gutenberg resulting in Fust taking over the printing house which had since moved to the Humbrecht Hof and which he, Fust, operated together with Peter Schoeffer. The Mainz Psalter was published by the Fust-Schoeffer Printing House in 1457. The Psalter was the first book ever to bear a publisher's imprint and which serves to this very day as the symbol of the printing trade.

Apart from his former colleague and benefactor Gutenberg continued to operate his own printing house. The "Tuerkenkalender" and the "Tuerkenbulle" were published by him in the years 1455 and 1456. Gutenberg was forced to leave his hometown in 1464 following the Stift-feud but soon thereafter found a protector in the new Mainz archbishop, Adolph von Nassau. In 1465 the archbishop elevated Gutenberg to the dignity of being a member of the Court in recognition of his unique "services". Gutenberg returned to Mainz and resided here until his death in 1468, enjoying free food and accommodations in the Algesheimer Hof in recognition of his singular contribution to mankind.

1: The Lettern Memorial

Between cathedral and Gutenberg Museum on the Square "Liebrauenplatz"

Gutenberg's trail-blazing invention was the setting of letters made of molten lead type by hand. The letters were cast from leaden cubes and raise-set in reverse. Numerous quantities of letters were simultaneously cast permitting the creation of large quantities of text with plentiful quantities of type readily available in order to produce an entire page at once. The Monument consists of nine sandstone cubes reminiscent of the leaden-block letters. The surfaces facing towards the Cathedral are so arranged to spell the name GUTENBERG. The same ornamented Capital letters beginning each chapter of the Gutenberg bible are reproduced here.

On the opposite side of those facets the chronological order of development of the Latin alphabet is sculpted beginning with Mesopotamian cuneiform symbols and leading up to modern times. The Monument of Letters was created by Mainzer sculptors who presented it to the City. It offers views many additional other aspects regarding the art of writing.

At this point, you now have the opportunity to pay a visit to the Gutenberg Museum which is situated in the immediate vicinity of the Letters Monument. Or, you may continue on the route and visit the Museum at another time as the entire tour concludes here later on.

2: The St. Martin's Cathedral Cloister

Crossing over the Liebfrauenplatz, continuing on past the Column of Nails, we go on in the direction of an arch which bears a likeness of St Martin. Left of the arch we find a plaque which informs us of the Gutenberg Trail's route. Going through the arch, we find on the immediate right the entrance to the cloister. It is one of the few parts of the building that survived from Gutenberg's times, a document in stone. It was built between 1400 and 1410 and served the spiritual-religious contemplation of the dignitaries. Even today a calm, meditative atmosphere pervades and can be experienced in this easily-accessible open area. Let yourself be carried back in time to the late Middle Ages and enjoy the serenity of the space. The cloister is part of the Cathedral and Diocese Museum whose offices border this area.

3: The Aschaffenberg House

Transversing the Domstrasse, continue on further to the Grebenstrasse. Turn right and you will arrive at the Arnsberger Hof and continue along to the Kirschgarten. Amidst the ensemble of houses made of half-timber construction and sandstone and the cobble-stone streets stands the Aschaffenberg House. This is the oldest half-timbered house in Mainz and was erected around 1500. The connection between Johannes Gutenberg and the late medieval building was first mentioned in a document from 1448. At that time, Gutenberg needed money for the further development of his invention. He obtained 150 Gulden from his cousin Arnold Gelthus. He obtained the funds from two Mainz citizens after pledging security for the loan in the form of interest payments made on the Aschaffenburg structure.

Stroll once again towards the cathedral. The Leichhofgasse enters the Leichhof from which you get a good view on the western portion of the monumental cathedral. A short walk further brings you across the Schoefferstrasse, past St John's and on the left hand side is our next destination, the Gutenbergplatz.

4: The Gutenberg Memorial on Gutenberg Square

The Gutenberg memorial statue erected here in this prominent location was unveiled by the Mainzer in 1837. The larger-than-life-sized bronze statue was designed by the Danish sculptor Bertil Thorvaldsen whose disciple H.W. Bissen cast the work. It shows the great inventor in a typical pose, commanding respect, with his Bible and his printing type in hand. The pedestal's sides portray in bas-relief working scenes in a printing house and were also fashioned by Thorvaldsen. The translation of the Latin inscription on the rear side reads: "Johannes Gensfleisch zu Gutenberg / Honoring (his) home town the City of Mainz / whereby once / throughout all of Europe / citizens contributed (funds) / in order to erect this monument. As no authentic image of Gutenberg has come down to us, an idealized portrayal was created as is the case in most such instances.

5: The Old University – Burial Site

Going on the right hand side past the Mainz State Theatre with its modern, new glass-encased "crown", you will come straight-away to the Old University. Across the way from this building there stood a Franciscan monastery in the 15th Century. Gutenberg was buried in the Monastery Church after his death in 1468. Later, the Jesuits who had taken possession of the complex, erected a new church designed by famed Baroque architect Balthasar Neumann. That church and the monastery were destroyed during the French bombardment of the city during the Napoleonic War in 1793. And with that destruction eventually all of the last remaining traces of Gutenberg's burial site disappeared. Enconced in an archway is an information tablet about the Gutenberg Trail.

6: The Gutenberg Hof – his Birthplace

In the immediate vicinity of Gutenberg's burial site stood his birthplace. Going along the right hand side of the Old University and continue a short distance along the Schusterstrasse. On the corner of Christofsstrasse stood the "Hof zum Gutenberg." This is where Gutenberg was born and where he later erected his first printing house after his return from Strassburg. To this very day one calls this work-site the "Urdruckerei" or "First Print Shop". Like many other buildings its construction was converted to Baroque style as that came into fashion. All of it was eventually destroyed during WWII. Today a pharmacy stands on the location. Yet another information plaque provides details about this great son of the City of Mainz.

7: Baptismal site at St. Christopher's Church – Algesheimer Hof

Let's come along down the Christofstrasse to the ruins of the St. Christoph Church. It was in this early Gothic church whose origins go back to the 9th Century, Gutenberg allegedly was christened. A large portion of the building was destroyed in WWII. Today, the stabilized ruin with its concrete nave is an admonitory monument dedicated to the victims of World War II. In the former eastern portion a baptismal font is found which dates back to Gutenberg's time. In the course of a tour, one may view this part of the ruins.

Next to the church is the Carmelite Place on which you can see the most modern statue of Gutenberg in the city. It was created in the Gutenberg Year 2000 by the Mainz sculptor Karlheinz Oswald. Made of iron, it portrays Gutenberg at the press. Gutenberg used a wooden press for printing which from its construction, mechanical action and operation reminds one of a wine press.

Only a few steps distant from here is the Algesheimer Hof where he spent his last years. Archbishop Adolph von Nassau, Mainz's prelate, provided it as a home for his old age. The entrance is decorated with the coat of arms of the Jesuit order, its later owners.

8: The Korb and Humbrecht houses – Press house

At the end of the Christofsgasse our tour leads us to the right through the Altenauergasse, past a retirement home for seniors, and over a foot-bridge into the Mainz pedestrian zone. Turning to the right we notice that we are at the end of the “Am Brand-Passage” where we can view the Staircase-tower of the Humbrechts Hof built in 1584.

According to the story, Gutenberg and Fust first established their print shop here and it was in this edifice that the Gutenberg bible was created. In truth, the building has been known since 1471 as the “Print House” and it also housed the Fust & Schoeffer print shop.

The Korb Hof was added to the Fust-Schoeffer printing complex already by 1476. It is situated somewhat setback from the passageway. The building is one of the few well-preserved Late Gothic patrician homes in Mainz. It gives a good impression of the construction technique of Gutenberg’s day. Exiting via the Korbgaesschen we leave the Korb Hof and find ourselves once again at the Market with the Heunen columns. The Market Place, the Liebfrauen Place – the end of our tour – melt together in one another and make up the tripartite Cathedral place with the addition of the Hoefchen.

9: Gutenberg Museum

At the end of our tour you shouldn’t miss to visit the famous Gutenberg Museum.