The Fust and Schöffer Office and the Printing of the Two-colour Initials in the 1457 Mainz Psalter

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In 1457, a newly established publishing office in Mainz, run by Johann Fust and Peter Schöffer, issued a Psalter. It was the second substantial book printed in Europe after the Gutenberg Bible, which had been printed c.1455 in the same city. As is well known, the Gutenberg Bible took its appearance from its manuscript predecessors. The most visible features that characterise a medieval manuscript include the employment of colour and decorative elements, such as rubrics and initials, but reproducing these in print was no easy task for early printers. In the Gutenberg Bible, the printing of rubrics was attempted at the outset but soon abandoned, likely due to the extra labour it required. From then on, the printers left blank spaces for the rubrics to be filled in manually. The same approach was taken for the initials that open books and prologues. In manuscripts, they were heightened with colours and occasionally also with decoration. In the Gutenberg Bible, instead of reproducing these initials typographically, the printers left the relevant spaces blank. It was thus left to individual owners of the books to furnish them with initials.

However, for the Mainz Psalter, the publishers attempted to print nearly all of the major components, including colour elements (Figs. 5.1–5.4), such as rubrics, red (and occasionally blue) Lombard initials and decorative initials in two colours. As a result of this impressive attempt, the Mainz Psalter now stands as one of the masterpieces of incunabula. Printing the decorative initials in red and blue, arguably the most complex aspect of this printing project, is the focus of this paper. Past studies on these initials, briefly summarised here, concentrated on how the initial blocks were produced and operated. This study aims to shed light on the production sequence of the initial blocks, the designs of the initials, and the apparent problem with the blue ink used by the printers. It concludes by considering the goals and intentions of the publishers in undertaking this challenging project which, ironically, must have resulted in more labour than finishing the colour elements by hand.

Description of the Mainz Psalter

The Mainz Psalter has survived in ten bound copies and a number of fragments, all on parchment. Its size is comparable to royal folio, appropriate for a book to be used on a lectern. Two sizes of Gothic textura type, here referred to as the smaller and the larger Psalter types, were used for the main text and rubrics. In addition, two

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7 Some of these questions have been briefly discussed in M. Ikeda, 'The First Experiments in Book Decoration at the Fust-Schöffer Press', in Early Printed Books as Material Objects: Proceedings of the Conference Organized by the IFLA Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, Munich, 19–21 August 2009, ed. B. Wagner and M. Reed, IFLA Publications 149 (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter Saur, 2010), 39–49, esp. 39–43.

8 For a comprehensive account of the Mainz Psalter, see O. Mazal, Der Mainzer Psalter von 1457: Kommentar zum Faksimiledruck 1969 (Zürich: Stocker, 1969).

FIGURE 5.1 Psalterium ([Mainz]: Johann Fust and Peter Schöffer, 14 August 1457), fol. 1r
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