

THE RENAISSANCE

Around 1400, a new era began in Europe. It was called the Renaissance, a term meaning “rebirth,” because people saw it as a rebirth of the ideals of ancient Greece and Rome—their art, literature, philosophy, and especially their respect for learning. Of course, the changes did not happen overnight, but the changes did come. The Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries had opened up trading routes to the Far East, which brought both wealth and new ideas to Europe. Strong rulers rose up and established stable kingdoms with written laws. Trade, industry, and learning advanced. In 1492, Columbus’s voyage to the Americas resulted in the founding of overseas empires, which brought great wealth to many European kingdoms (sadly, at great expense to the native peoples). However, one development would overshadow all others.

Around 1450, a German named Johannes Gutenberg invented the movable-type printing press—said by many to be the most significant invention of the last thousand years. (Actually the Chinese originally developed the technology, but the Europeans put it to practical use.) It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this event. The printing press made it possible to make multiple copies of books in a fraction of the time it took to hand copy them. In just a few decades, books became plentiful. Now it was possible to spread information quickly, and this opened the door to mass education.

During the early Renaissance, most books specifically for children were textbooks or educational books. Sir Thomas Elyot’s *The Book Named the Governor* (1531) and Roger Ascham’s *The Scholemaster* (1570) are two examples of “books of courtesy,” giving lessons in proper behavior for young gentlemen. (Women did not yet merit their own books.) The

Renaissance, like the Middle Ages, was a religious period and during this time the hatred between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants resulted in much bloodshed. John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* (1563), an anti-Catholic work filled with grisly scenes of violent deaths for religion’s sake, was one of the most popular books among England’s schoolchildren. On a cheerier note, about one hundred years later, John Comenius’s *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1658) appeared. It is generally regarded as the first children’s picture book and was intended as a textbook for the teaching of Latin through pictures (see Figure 1.1).



FIGURE 1.1 John Comenius’s *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* is often considered the first children’s picture book. It first appeared in 1658 as a German/Latin textbook and was an immediate success. It revolutionized Latin instruction, a necessity in a society in which Latin was still the language of scholarship. The English/Latin version, from which this illustration is taken, appeared in 1659. Although the woodcut illustrations appear crude, they provide a wealth of information about seventeenth-century European life.