

Jan Amos Comenius

1592-1670

Educator, Philosopher, and Friend of
All Children

Johannes (Jan) Amos Comenius was born in 1592 in the town of Nimitz, Moravia, a part of what is now the Czech Republic. His parents were members of the Bohemian Brethren (also called the Unitas Fratrum, founded in 1457. They can trace their origins to the Reformer Jan Hus and are considered to be the parent body of the Moravian Church.

The future educator attended the Calvinist Herborn Academy and Heidelberg University in Germany. He became pastor of the Moravian church at Fulneck in 1618 and was their last bishop. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) between Protestants and Catholics dreadful period in European life. It came to Fulneck in 1627 when the Catholics took the city and Comenius lost his family and his home. He led the Moravian Brethren into exile and settled at Leszno (Lissa) in Poland, where he was in charge of both Moravian and Brethren churches. He continued to teach and to write his educational works.

In 1631 Comenius published his **Janua** (*Janua linguarum reserata*), or *Gate of Language*, in Latin and Czech. Here he expressed his belief that in order to learn a language it was important that it be done in relation to things. It was translated into other languages.



Jan Amos Comenius



Old Print of Herborn, Moravia



The exiled Comenius leads his people into Poland. CHI Archives

Between 1633 and 1638 he worked on **Didacta Magna** his educational manifesto, in which he presented his views on effective teaching and learning. In it he anticipated the American system of kindergarten, elementary school, secondary school, college and university.

Moving Around

Comenius reputation as an educator was now known widely, and the government of Sweden asked for his aid in planning the revision of the national school system. He moved to Sweden in 1642 and was there until 1648, when he returned to Leszna, Poland. There he became first senior of the Brethren,

In 1650 Comenius was in Sárospatak, Hungary, as a professor at the Protestant college. He went there at the invitation of Zsuzsanna Lorántffy, (Susanna Lorantffy), widow of György Rákóczi I, Prince of Transylvania. A Calvinist, she shared his husband's desire to establish Protestantism in the schools of Transylvania then still a part of Hungary

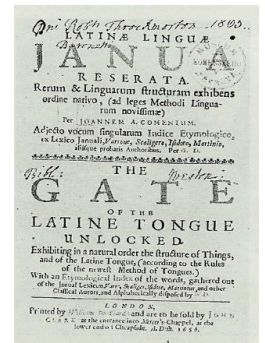
The Harvard Invitation Cotton Mather, the distinguished Puritan minister and president of Harvard University wrote: *"That brave of old man, Johannes Amis Comenius, . . . was indeed agreed withal, by one Mr. Winthrop in his travels through the Low Countries, to come over to New England, and illuminate their College and Country, in the quality of a President, which was now become vacant. But the solicitations of the Swedish ambassador diverting him another way, the incomparable Moravian became not an American."* (On the resignation of President Dunster in 1654)

Comenius Wanted Education for All Children

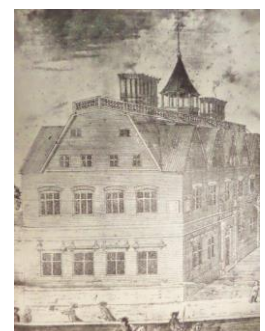
"Not the children of the rich or of the powerful only, but of all alike, boys and girls, both noble and ignoble, rich and poor, in all cities and towns, villages and hamlets, should be sent to school."

Jan Amos Comenius, *Didactica Magna* ("Great Art of Teaching")

Comenius' Janua (right) was inspired by a Latin-Spanish textbook, *Janua Linguarum*, published at Salamanca by William Bathe (Baetus), an Irish monk. A London edition (1617) was in Latin, Spanish, English and French. Comenius translated it into Greek.



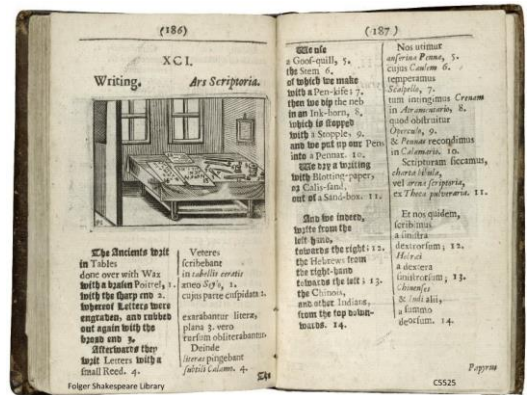
Zsuzsanna Lorántffy, Cotton Mather, and Harvard in 1700



In 1655 Comenius returned to Leszno, Poland and to work on **Orbis Sensualium Pictus**, sometimes called *The World in Pictures*. Because there was an insufficient number of skilled engravers in Leszno, Comenius turned to Michael Endter in Nuremberg, Germany, where the book was published in Latin and German in 1658 and later into 19 languages.

The Orbis was similar to the **Janua** and was intended to be a text book and a juvenile encyclopedia, to teach Latin. But this book was different, and how wonderfully different! It was illustrated with pictures relating to the various topics in the text. Children loved it, educators praised it. “As a picture of the life and manners of the seventeenth century, the work has great historical interest.” So wrote *Quick’s Educational Reformer* in 1868.

Of his Janua Comenius wrote “I could not have imagined ... that this childish book [would be] received with universal approbation by the learned world.” How much more so would he have been surprised that Orbis Pictus held its place of importance in multiple language versions for over a century.



Orbis Pictus

Different editions translated the Latin text into one or more languages. The illustrated categories indicated the names of items in the pictures.



Nuremberg in 1700

Other Works

The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart is a satirical allegory. Considered a jewel of Baroque literature, it is one of the author's most important works. Comenius finished the first version in 1623, but he rewrote the book several times. The labyrinth is the city entered by the pilgrim/author.

In 1639 the outline of his **Pansophie Prodromus** was published in England without his permission. He was Influenced by Sir Francis Bacon, who was a leader in the pansophic or encyclopedic movement. Comenius sought to a principle to organize and outline all knowledge, so that it can be grasped even by a child.

Comenius moved to Holland in 1656, Lissa having been destroyed by the Poles. His home and most of his manuscripts were burned. Comenius now turned to his theological interests.

He published **Unam Necessarium** in 1670, *“a kind of testament or will for all who would heed, a summary of experience and belief as lived by Europe’s master educator and bishop of the Unitas Fratrum, the early Moravian Church.”*¹

Comenius died at Amsterdam in the Netherlands on November 4, 1670 and was buried in Naarden, where there is a Comenius museum. There is also a Comenius museum in the building of the former congregation of the Unity of Czech Brethern in Fulnek

¹ Vernon Nelson, translator, 1958 edition, Moravian Theological Seminary. Bethlehem, PA

“We know not necessary things because we have not learned things necessary.”

Jan Amos Comenius.



Above: Comenius Museum at Naarden. Below, Museum at Fulneck



Comenius' grave and Statue, Naarden, Holland



