

That Incomparable Moravian

One day in the late 1640s in Massachusetts, Cotton Mather, ever zealous to make Puritan New England the cultural center of the New World, noted in his journal his disappointment that a certain "incomparable Moravian" was not, after all, to become an American by accepting the presidency of Harvard College:

That brave old man, Johannes Amos Comenius, the fame of whose worth has been trumpeted as far as more than three languages could carry it, was indeed agreed . . . to come over to New England, and illuminate their Colledge and Country, in the quality of a President, which was now become vacant. But the solicitation of the Swedish Ambassador diverting him another way, that incomparable Moravian became not an American.

Who was this Johannes Amos Comenius? Why had his fame as an educator spread all the way from Europe to Mather's Massachusetts Bay Colony?

Comenius was an educational reformer born in 1592 in Moravia (now part of the Czech Republic). He became a clergyman of the United Brethren, an evangelical Protestant reform sect known popularly today as the Moravian church. At the time of his consideration for the presidency of Harvard, he was living in exile in Sweden. Indeed, the religious persecutions of the Thirty Years' War and its aftermath had forced Comenius to live most of his life away from his native Moravia.



IOHAN-AMOS COMENIVS,
MORAVVS. A^o ÆTAT 50: 1042
Czech Subject

Joh. Amos Comenii 1657

ORBIS SENSUALIUM PICTUS.

Hoc est,
Omnium fundamentum in Mundo
Rerum, & in vita Adhuc,
Pictura & Nomenclatura

JOH. AMOS COMENIVS'S
VISIBLE WORLD.

OR,
A Picture and Nomenclature of all the chief
Things that are in the world; and of
Mens Employments therein.

A Work newly written by the Author in
Latine, and High-Dutch (being one of his last
Essays, and the most suitable to Childrens
capacities of any that he hath hitherto
made) & translated into English,

By CHARLES HOOLE, Teacher of a
Private Grammar-School in
Lothbury, LONDON.

For the use of young Latine-Scholars.
Nihil est in intellectu, quod non prius fuit in sensu. Arist.

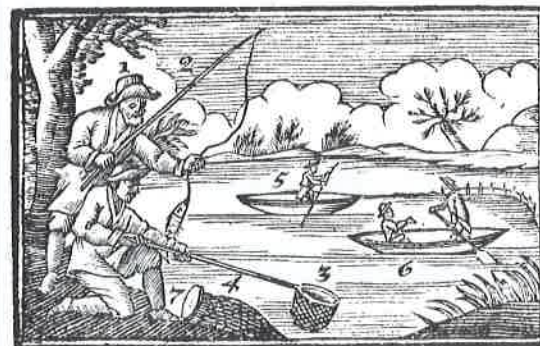
LONDON,
Printed for J. Kirton, at the Kings-Arms, in
Saint Pauls Church-yard, 1659.

Despite this and the deprivations of war, Comenius achieved fame throughout Europe as a reformer and writer of innovative textbooks and other educational works. His *Janua Linguarum Reserata* ("The Gate of Language Unlocked") was a Latin language textbook that taught a basic vocabulary of eight thousand carefully selected words and the principal points of Latin grammar. The instructional strategy of the *Janua* consisted of Latin sentences about a variety of topics, forming a kind of encyclopedia of basic human knowledge of that time. Comenius also argued that the teaching of languages should be divided into stages parallel to four human developmental stages. For this insight Piaget acknowledged Comenius as a forerunner of genetic psychology.⁹ The *Janua* became one of the great pedagogical best-sellers of all time,

⁹Jean Piaget, *J. A. Comenius: Pages Choisies* (Paris: UNESCO, 1957).

LI.

Piscatio.



Fishing.

and it influenced, wittingly or unwittingly, virtually all later scholars of language instruction.

Comenius was also one of the earliest (and certainly the most renowned) champions of what we call visual literacy and visual education. The last fourteen years of his life were spent in Amsterdam, from where he oversaw the publication in 1657 of the work for which he is today best known and on which he had been working for years: *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* ("The Visible World Pictured").

Orbis Sensualium Pictus was the first illustrated textbook specifically designed for use by children in an instructional setting. (It was not the first children's picture book. The English printer Caxton, for example, had produced an illustrated edition of Aesop's *Fables* as early as 1484.) The design and illustrations of Comenius's text were expressly intended to enhance learning. The 150 woodcut drawings were learning and teaching devices, not mere decorations. The text embodied the application of educational theories espoused by the author over a period of forty years. It is interesting to note, for example, that Comenius chose Aristotle's observation "*Nihil est in intellectu, quod non prius fuit in sensu*" ("There is nothing in the mind which was not first in the senses") to adorn his title page. The primacy of this principle has been supported increasingly by modern psychological research.

<p>The Fisher-man 1. catcheth fish, either on the Shoar, with an Hook, 2. which hangeth by a line from the angling-rod, and on which the bait sticketh; or with a Cleek-Net, 3. which hanging on a Pole, 4. is put into the water; or in a Boat, 5. with a Trammel-Net 6. or with a Weel, 7. which is laid in the water by flight.</p>	<p><i>Piscator</i> 1. captat pisces, five, in litore, <i>Hamo</i>, 2. qui ab <i>arundine</i> filo pendet, & cui inhaeret <i>Esca</i>; five <i>Fundâ</i>, 3. quæ pendens <i>Perticâ</i>, 4. aquæ immittitur; five, in <i>Cymba</i>, 5. <i>Reti</i>, 6. five <i>Nassa</i>, 7. quæ per Noctem demergitur.</p>
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Orbis Sensualium Pictus is truly remarkable for having incorporated, more than three hundred years ago, so many educational concepts that seem thoroughly modern. Underlying Comenius's use of visuals was a theory of perception based on the idea that we learn through our senses and that this learning imprints a mental image that leads to understanding. A real object is preferable for this process, but visuals may be used in the learning environment as substitutes for the real thing.

The design and illustrations of *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, the author tells us in his preface, were intended "to entice witty children to it, that they may not conceit a torment to be in the school, but dainty fare. For it is apparent, that children (even from their infancy almost) are delighted with pictures, and willingly please their eyes with these sights." His pedagogical aim was that children "may be furnished with the knowledge of the prime things that are in the world, by sport and merry pastime."

The idea that learning should be a "merry pastime" rather than a burdensome chore is startlingly modern. Indeed, centuries were to pass before this basic educational philosophy became what it is today—the common wisdom. Aptly called "that incomparable Moravian" in his own time, Johannes Amos Comenius may still be called so in ours.