

ENCYCLOPÉDIE,
O U
DICTIONNAIRE RAISONNÉ
DES SCIENCES,
DES ARTS ET DES MÉTIERS,
PAR UNE SOCIÉTÉ DE GENS DE LETTRES.

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*Tantum series juncturaque pollet,
Tantum de medio sumptis accedit honoris!* HORAT.

TOME PREMIER.



Diderot's 1750 Encyclopedia

How do you know when—and where—big changes are happening? Paris in the late eighteenth century was experiencing massive advances in science and technology, a great political transformation, and experiments in industrialization. But in 1750, most of its people were poor. The highest class were the same land-owning nobility and monarchy that had ruled for centuries, and its streets were covered in mud and excrement. Yet its thinkers were also producing one of the most important archives of knowledge and thought the world would ever see—the Encyclopedia. Its existence may have been a signal of change to come.



00:01

*Amy Elizabeth Robinson,
PhD
Drawings of 18th century
Paris*

Why start a history course in 1750? What makes this moment a turning point? And what makes 18th century France a good place to start?

In many ways, 18th century France was a bridge between the medieval and modern worlds. The capital city of Paris, in particular, symbolizes this bridge. The roads in Paris weren't paved and often turned into pools of mud and excrement—both human and animal. But these streets were also some of the first to be illuminated at night, which gave it the nickname, the “City of Lights.” This proved to be quite a contradiction.

00:55

*Artwork depicting the
wealthy in colorful, high
end clothing and tall hats
and wigs*

*Text: “Philosophes:
Scholars who wrote about
science, politics, literature,
and art.”*

*“Salons: Meeting rooms,
usually run by wealthy
women, where new ideas
were discussed.”*

Paris was viewed as a city where men and women of the upper classes wore fine clothes and powdered wigs. In Paris, the wealthy strolled on well-lit streets, discussing new approaches to art, philosophy, science, and politics. But when they walked the muddy streets, they sometimes paid workers to brush the filth off of them as they traveled. Here was the contradiction—while there were educated philosophes, or scholars, meeting in aristocratic salons and keeping their clothes impeccably clean, most of those living in Paris were working class or poor. They worked as artisans or servants, book binders, printers, bakers, makers of cutlery, hats and clothing, maids and horsemen, and filth-scrapers and cooks. These people were the engine of the city.

01:59

Painting of Denis Diderot

These two very different worlds converged not just in the streets of Paris, but also in one controversial—and very large—18th century publication, the “Encyclopédie,” or “Encyclopedia.” This encyclopedia began its life right around 1750, when Denis Diderot, a writer living in Paris, was hired to translate a two-volume English encyclopedia into French. But this simple project eventually grew into a 17-volume text—with an additional 11 volumes of illustrations—on an array of historical, philosophical, and scientific topics, plus descriptions of the various arts and trades of the 18th century. This was a monumental work, long predating Wikipedia and even before the publication of the “Encyclopedia Britannica,” which your parents and grandparents probably used.

03:06

The “Encyclopedia” was an attempt to define and alphabetize knowledge. It was the most significant example of collective learning—the sharing and preserving of knowledge across generations—in its day. It took decades to complete and had over 100 contributors. At a time when the average Paris family spent over half their income on basic bread, producing the “Encyclopedia” cost the equivalent of almost \$11 million.

03:41

*Text and image:
“Encyclopédie” illustration
of fan making – image
shows two people working*

So the “Encyclopedia,” like Paris, bridged the medieval and the modern. It catalogues all the ordinary trades of the 18th century, providing a window into what life was like before the Industrial Revolution. But it is also a modern critique of authority—both of the king and the Catholic Church. Many of the ideas expressed in the “Encyclopedia” contributed to social and political transformation, and eventually the French Revolution.

at desks making fans, as well as close-up drawings of the fans in process

04:15

Drawings of tools from the "Encyclopédie"; a diagram of sail-making.

One way it did this was simply by dignifying the experience of work. Common trades and materials were included in its pages, right alongside the most visionary political and philosophical ideas of the time. Sail-making and science, tobacco and tolerance, cosmology and cotton, natural rights and navigator all jostled up next to one another.

04:46

Image of 'Chateáu de Vincennes', the prison where Diderot was jailed in 1749
Image of The Bastille, another French prison where Voltaire was imprisoned from 1717-1718
Artwork depicting discussion in a salon

In its time, the "Encyclopedia" was extremely controversial and it even landed Diderot in jail. In 18th century France, it was dangerous to write anything that seemed to call into question social hierarchies, and the authority of king or church. But there were many scholars who were doing just that. The French authorities used spies and the threat of imprisonment, torture, or even death to scare authors. Some critics, like Voltaire, went into exile. Others worked in secret and published anonymously. Still, ideas spread. New ideas about representative government, the consent of the governed, and freedom of speech and press were discussed in salons and on the pages of anonymous written works. Innovations in printing, coupled with an increase in literacy, meant that these ideas were also being discussed beyond France. These ideas made their way along networks of trade and communication throughout Europe and the Americas.

05:59

Drawing of police storming a printing press

This atmosphere of new ideas and debate set the stage for the political revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries in the American colonies, France, Haiti, and Latin America.

This is why Diderot was jailed. The French police and book censors were always looking for works that challenged the established authority of church and state. King and priest alike were afraid of the "Encyclopedia" and its radical ideas. The state banned its publication.

06:38

The Revolutionary Encyclopedia: Challenging Tradition

Painting of Madame de Pompadour

But together, the philosophes who contributed to the "Encyclopedia" made up a who's who of intellectual France, and the king couldn't jail them all. They were educated men—well-connected, white, and middle class, plus a few aristocrats, too. Historians think that two women may have contributed anonymously to the work. We know that other women hosted salons or provided financial support. The most famous patron and protector of the Encyclopedia was Madame de Pompadour, mistress of the French king Louis XV. So here is another contradiction. Why would the mistress of the king support such a dangerous work?

07:27

Portraits of Frederick the Great and Catherine the Great

Actually, several European kings and queens—known as enlightened monarchs—did. Frederick the Great of Prussia and Catherine the Great of Russia both acted as patrons of certain philosophes. Catherine paid Diderot an annual fee for the upkeep of his library, which she inherited after his death. Frederick gave Voltaire a place to hide and work when he was exiled from Paris. So there were people in high places who appreciated the "Encyclopedia." These enlightened aristocrats and monarchs may have sensed the change in the political air, and thought it was better to support reform than to repress change and risk revolution.

08:15

*Image and description of:
Louise d'Épinay, friend
of Diderot, Grimm and
Rousseau, and author of
"L'Histoire de Madame
Montbrilliant"*

The philosophes themselves viewed their work as bringing the light of reason to a world of superstition and abuse of power. They tended to hold enlightened ideas about women, arguing that women were kept back and "in the dark" through conventional religious upbringings and a lack of education. Most were also unusually critical of slavery. Unlike most of 18th century French society, they did not view the enslaved as property or "beasts of burden" but rather as humans capable of feelings and reason, and worthy of liberty and equality.

08:58

*Image of the entry
on Slavery in the
"Encyclopédie"*

"Christian nations have authorized the buying and selling" of people, wrote Chevalier de Jaucourt in the "Encyclopedia," "and forgotten the basic principles of Nature and Christianity, which made all men equal." These thinkers were also critical of the Catholic Church and of religion in general. The Church wanted people to blindly follow a set of rules and beliefs, argued Diderot, while philosophes sought to examine the world through evidence and reason or "light."

09:34

*Religious depiction of
communion*

The authors of the "Encyclopedia" were very clever and careful in how they presented these radical views. In some cases, they added controversial thoughts to quite ordinary entries. Because why would a censor look for a critique of religion under "eagle"? Or they cross-referenced entries as a sneaky way to mock authority. So, "cannibalism" was cross-referenced with "altar," "Communion," and "Eucharist." Or they used the work of well-known scholars to bolster their radical views. For example, the "Encyclopedia's" elaborate "tree of knowledge" was based on the work of English philosopher Francis Bacon, who wrote over 100 years earlier. But inside the tree, "theology" was connected to "superstition," "divination," and "black magic."

*Image of the "tree of
knowledge", a complex
chart*

10:36

While the "Encyclopedia" was ground-breaking in many ways, it was also limited by its time. The authors accepted some damaging stereotypes of the age. For example, Diderot's writings on the Jewish community were filled with insulting and stereotypical views. So we can think of this monumental text as a sort of hinge or bridge. Its pages were filled partly with snapshots of "life as it was," good and bad, and partly with a radical and energizing intellectual vision.

11:14

*Painting of the execution
of Marie Antoinette in
1793;*

*Text: "An image of
Voltaire writing his
book, 'Elements of the
Philosophy of Newton'".
Image shows Voltaire
writing at a desk while
angels float above him.*

This radical vision of liberty and equality burst into life with the French Revolution in July 1789. But most of the "Encyclopedia's" authors were not revolutionaries in these later years. Many were quite old or dead by 1789. And most, while critical of monarchy, still believed it could be improved by limiting the power of the king rather than cutting off his head. When we read the "Encyclopedia" today, we can glimpse the world before industrial and political revolutions shook people's lives. But we can also see how it contributed to the coming transformations. On the whole, the "Encyclopedia" challenged the idea that people should blindly accept authority and traditions. Instead, it encouraged people to view the world through reason, science, evidence, and possibility. This is what made it both popular and frightening.