The first American edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* appeared on the market in 1790. It was published by Thomas Dobson of Philadelphia, and although it was in large part merely a reprinting of the third English edition (1788), the job was a tremendous one for a small establishment. Philadelphia was then the capital of the United States and the richest North American city, and it was probably the only city of the New World where so large a printing enterprise could have been accomplished. No effort was spared to produce a fine encyclopaedia, and today the condition of the set recently acquired for the Museum Library justifies the pains expended.

Five hundred and forty-three well-executed copperplates by American engravers—Scott, Thackara, Valance, Trenchard, Allardice, Smither, Seymour, and others—were added to the text. The paper was manufactured in Pennsylvania and was the best obtainable.

The work was titled simply *Encyclopaedia*, and the flattering and flowery dedication to the King of England, to be found in the third English edition, was left out. Only those careful people who read prefaces could have told that it was in reality the *Britannica*.

The plan of publication was by subscription, and, since there was no dearth of intellectual curiosity and books in those days were not readily available, the subscription was so large that the edition was doubled after the printing of the first volume. We know that Jefferson owned the *Encyclopaedia* (its strictly classical architectural principles must have delighted him), and it is said that Washington, who liked raffles and lotteries, once put up one pound, four shillings for a chance on a set.

To satisfy the demand for the written word, this *Encyclopaedia*, like others of its time, endeavored to be all things to all men. The long articles on chemistry, algebra, anatomy, mineralogy, geometry, agriculture, and so forth, took the place of textbooks on these subjects, and indeed several of them were published separately and sold as such. Dictionary definitions were also included, for thirty-eight years were to pass before Noah Webster brought out his great dictionary. In addition, the *Encyclopaedia* sought to be a moral guide—witness the long articles on philosophy and theology. In contrast to present policy, opinions and viewpoints were offered upon all possible occasions. Under “Pun,” for example, the fussy eighteenth-century encyclopaedist says, “The practice of punning is the miserable refuge of those who wish to pass for wits without having a grain of wit in their own composition.”

The information on practical subjects was unusually fine and was probably the best reason for the *Encyclopaedia’s* popularity. This was natural in a pioneer society wrestling
with a host of material problems. However, its moral tone was puritanical and its general philosophical outlook narrow and limited; hence it could not have had much intellectual influence nor could it have participated in any great liberal movement as the French Encyclopédie, published some thirty years previously, had done.

Although the emphasis is undoubtedly on utilitarian matters, what of the fine arts and related subjects? The encyclopaedist did not by any means neglect these affairs. There are fully illustrated and comprehensive articles on drawing and perspective. As miniature painting was at this time at the height of its vogue, directions were given on the rendering of draperies, lace, “crape,” fur, landscapes, fire, jewels, trees, and flowers. Good advice, also, was to be found on leathermaking, wax-working, painting on glass, lacemaking, japanning, and veneering. However, no notice was taken of the native American arts and crafts. No word appeared concerning the silver, glass, and furniture which are now thought of as artistically important.

Reasonably well-written biographies of artists were provided although the encyclopaedist was careful not to show too much admiration. Giotto received a bare mention, as the Italian primitives had not yet come into their own, and was accused of not being able to “express liveliness in the eyes, tenderness in the flesh, or strength in the muscles.” Rembrandt, on the other hand, was fully appreciated and his painting was described as a “kind of magic.” Two and a half pages are taken to describe the painting of Sir Joshua Reynolds, while Raphael was finished off in a page and a half.

A few of the inventions of contemporary Americans had impressed the European mind, and of those which the Encyclopædia deigned to notice, most attention was given to the inventions of Benjamin Franklin. “The late ingenious Dr. Franklin has contrived a clock to show the hours, minutes and seconds with only three wheels and two pinions in the whole movement.” The famous Franklin stove is described with complete directions for its manufacture and many excellent engravings.

It takes some exercise of the imagination to picture the social life of the early republic. Entertainment came largely from parlor games, reading, and the like. The encyclopaedist here offered his articles on legerdemain, card tricks, sleight-of-hand performances, and various other kinds of “magic.” He even lists a number of charades although he could not resist a sneer: “Charade—the name of a new species of composition or literary amusement. It owes its name to the idler who invented it.”

There was no sneer, however, for dancing, which in a very long article was given the dignity of a fine art. There the encyclopaedist admitted that women appeared to be better dancers than men, but only because “art and the use of petticoats come fortunately to the help of the female dancer.” “The hoop,” he explained, “conceals a multitude of defects.”

Upon only one subject did the encyclopaedist find himself at a complete loss. After devoting a page and a half to an excellent and straight-forward description of men’s hats, he concluded weakly, “Hats are also made for women’s wear.” This dangerous subject was disposed of in six lines, it being the one thing that, then as now, defied analysis.

Although the articles are not signed, as they are in the later editions, it is known that American scholars rewrote many of the longer articles and added material of their own. The article on America, for example, was entirely rewritten by Jedidiah Morse and was later published in separate form. As it had always been the policy of the Britannica to exclude biographies of living persons, whatever comments there were on Washington and other national heroes appeared in this article, as well as an account of the American Revolution. The British are given credit for courage, but the exploits of the Revolutionists are described with pride and gratification. “That the scholars of this country could critically review and correct the scientific authorities of Great Britain in these and other important branches of study,” says Charles Evans in his American Bibliography, “is significant of a high standard of scholarship.”