

THE EDITORS OF THE *ENCYCLOPAEDIA*

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Part 1 – Diderot's life; a genius administrator

Who directed the edition of the *Encyclopaedia*? Let's take a look at the three editors of this huge work: Diderot, D'Alembert and Jaucourt. We'll start with Diderot. Diderot, first name Denis, born in 1713 in Langres to a family of craftsmen, arrived in Paris after brilliant studies and made a living as a translator. His first big production, in 1749, *Letter on the Blind for the Use of those who can see*, a vast atheistic, materialistic reflection on the origin of ideas, was forbidden and Diderot imprisoned in Vincennes' dungeon. He owed his liberation to the booksellers of the *Encyclopaedia*, which he had accepted to conduct two years earlier.

While conducting his immense work as a novelist, playwright, art critic, philosopher and political thinker, Diderot and his family lived off the meagre fees the booksellers paid him. He was one of the first writers of France to live off his writing. Later, the sale of his library to the Tsarina of Russia assured him a stable income. He went to Russia in 1773 and stayed there for several months. He died in Paris in 1784.

In the *Encyclopaedia*, he is the author of more than 6,000 articles in all fields: botany, cuisine, fashion, but mainly in philosophy, French language and arts and crafts. He also wrote true prose poems for the *Encyclopaedia*. He signed with an asterisk at the beginning of articles. Finally, he also took care of all the engraved plates that he himself controlled, as we see here: "Seen, good. Diderot."

Part 2 – Diderot, inventor

Rousseau, who was his childhood friend, described Diderot as a universal genius. Later, his work as a materialistic atheistic thinker was so important that he was called "the Philosopher". But Diderot was also one of the greatest artists of his time, and he certainly was the greatest inventor in the art of writing field. It is to him that we owe what became the modern novel, with *Jacques the Fatalist* or *Madame de la Carlière*, thanks to a total renewal of prose and fictional rhythm.

It is to him also that we owe modern theatre, by his practice of a new genre turned banal today, the drama. See *The natural Son*, but also his comedy. *Is he good? Is he wicked?* He also has an innovative conception of staging and acting, as seen in *Paradox of the Actor*.

Even cinema owes him a lot. The great filmmaker Eisenstein considered Diderot an editing master. We also owe him the invention of art criticism because from 1759 on, he regularly wrote reports on paintings, sculptures and engravings exhibited at the Louvre's Palace, as well as an essay on painting that Goethe admired a lot.

As for his philosophical essays, they were written in one of the favourite forms of this dialectic thinker, the dialogue: *D'Alembert's dream*, *Entretien d'un philosophe avec la Maréchale de ****, *Refutation of Helvetius*, and in *Rameau's Nephew*, Diderot dialogued with others' thought of and his own.

He wrote a lot, and his letters to his lover Sophie Volland are a masterpiece of love correspondence but also a valuable testimony of the artistic, intellectual and political life of Paris.

Diderot was also the author of an important political work, for example his critique of the Russian Constitution conceived by Tsarina Catherine II, his *Observations sur le Nakaz* or in the *Essay on the Reigns of Claudius and Nero*, reflection on philosophers' relationship with political power.

It should be noted that since Diderot made a formal commitment at the time of his release from prison never to publish works deemed seditious, he published during his life almost nothing of the works we know of him, much of which was only discovered in the following century, or even in the 20th century.

In the *Encyclopaedia*, Diderot gave a definition of a philosopher that could well be his own, when he mentioned a philosopher who tramples on prejudices, tradition, seniority, universal consent, authority, in a word everything that subjugates public opinion, dares to think of itself and to admit nothing but the testimony of its experience and reason. It is the "Eclectism" article. To dare thinking for oneself and to rely on experience and reason. Here were the main challenges of the *Encyclopaedia*, according to Diderot. However, he wasn't the only publisher in this adventure, as we are going to see now.

Part 3 – The other editors: D'Alembert and Jaucourt

Indeed, there were two others: D'Alembert and Louis de Jaucourt. Jean le Rond D'Alembert, 1717-1783, was one of the greatest mathematicians of his time, author of a famous *Treatise on Dynamics* and member of both the Academy of Sciences and the French Academy. He wrote more than 1,800 articles on geometry, astronomy, optics, dynamics and even on French synonyms. He is the author of the *Preliminary Discourse*, which is the *Encyclopaedia*'s preface, a vast human knowledge panorama. He ceased to be editor of the book in 1758. D'Alembert was also a remarkable polemicist, as we will see later. He signed his articles with a mark, a round in parentheses.

Lastly, the third publisher is little known despite his importance. The Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, 1704-1780, of which no portrait is available, was the third publisher of the encyclopaedic dictionary after the departure of D'Alembert. Doctor by trade, Jaucourt, tireless, wrote more than 17,000 articles in all fields. He signed his articles in full letters, knight of Jaucourt, or with his initials D.J. Protestant, therefore belonging to a persecuted community, he was one of the great voices of the *Encyclopaedia*, and you will soon see some of his work.

I would conclude by saying that in order to direct the *Encyclopaedia*, Diderot as principal publisher, D'Alembert then Jaucourt composed an association of skills and talents surprisingly complementary. Their common points were, among others, an independent spirit, intellectual energy and courage. The heritage of the *Encyclopaedia* is substantial. In addition to a *Supplement* and a table of contents published in 1776, we can mention the Genevan and Tuscan editions, Yverdon's Protestant remake, Swiss, Panckoucke's *Systematic Encyclopaedia*, and in the 19th century, *Description of Egypt* under the Empire and later still, Pierre Larousse's *Grand dictionary*.