

# A Magazine for the Ladies

By Chloe Nehme

There is something to be said about the timelessness of magazine publications. Today, they take the form of internet blog spots and online articles, but magazines date back to Germany in the 1660s in the form of monthly theological discussions.<sup>1</sup> It is here where the story opens, but let us flip forward through a few more pages in history to reach the late 1800s. This is where the Modern Priscilla takes foot– a staple in the early 20th century American Women’s life.



**MODERN PRISCILLA MAGAZINE**  
**MAY 1921 ISSUE**  
Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc.  
Archives Collection #1972.18.a

The *Modern Priscilla* takes its roots in Lynn, Massachusetts in 1887, its first editor being Frank Spencer. Spencer was well known for his magazine cover and crayon illustrations, and had previous experience working as an illustrator and art director of Ladies Home Journal.<sup>2</sup> The magazine began as a 16-page quarto that highlighted ornamental needle work, dress patterns, and china patterns.

This was a good start into what the magazine would become, especially because needlework would become a staple among a woman's hobbies. A newspaper article from 1888 described Priscilla as such– “A monthly journal devoted to ladies’ fancy work and household interest... Its literary tone is pure and elevating and it is a welcome visitor to every lady.” Annual subscriptions cost 50 cents.<sup>3</sup> In 1894, it moved its headquarters to Boston under the Boston: Priscilla Company.<sup>4,5</sup> In 1907, it announced that over 172,000 women had become subscribers.<sup>6</sup> In 1922, these numbers rose up to 600,000.<sup>7</sup>

The Boylston Historical Society & Museum has in its Archives Collection, the May 1921 issue of *Modern Priscilla*, which was donated by Mr. and Mrs. Norman French. Norman and Margot were two of the original founders of the Boylston Historical Society in 1973. The French family are direct descendants of Captain Robert Andrews who led the North Precinct of Shrewsbury (Boylston) on the Alarm on 19 April 1775. It is evident by her handwriting on the front of the magazine that Margot was interested in this issues’ designs for the knitted baby clothes and the baby pillow.

The artist for the gorgeous cover of this issue is unknown, but over the years the *Modern Priscilla* covers featured many artists. Notable illustrators included Sarah Stillwell Weber (May 1919), William Haskell Coffin (June 1925, August 1926, March 1928), and Clara Miller Burd (August 1922).<sup>8,9,10,11</sup>

## Advertisement

The inside cover holds an advertisement for Cream of Wheat Co., as an illustration of Uncle Tom’s Cabin by Edward V. Brewer, a notable artist who worked for the company. Looking on the page next to it reveals a section titled “*Priscilla Speaks for Herself*.” This features articles about English Needle Work, hailing back to the magazine's roots in fancy work, and more.

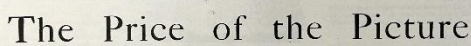


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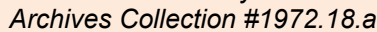
<sup>1</sup> [www.britannica.com/topic/publishing/Magazine-publishing](http://www.britannica.com/topic/publishing/Magazine-publishing)  
<sup>2</sup> [www.newspapers.com/article/the-philadelphia-inquirer-frank-s-guild/169107079/](http://www.newspapers.com/article/the-philadelphia-inquirer-frank-s-guild/169107079/)  
<sup>3</sup> [books.google.com/books?id=IK0-AQAAMAAJ&newbks=1&newbks\\_redir=0&dq=Frank%20Spencer%20Guild%20Priscilla&pg=PA1063#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=IK0-AQAAMAAJ&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&dq=Frank%20Spencer%20Guild%20Priscilla&pg=PA1063#v=onepage&q&f=false)  
<sup>4</sup> [www.magazineart.org/piwigo/index.php?/category/29](http://www.magazineart.org/piwigo/index.php?/category/29)  
<sup>5</sup> [search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AOGGOCUWHUN67V8X](https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AOGGOCUWHUN67V8X)  
<sup>6</sup> [books.google.com/books?id=cns51x3JIWkC&newbks=1&newbks\\_redir=0&dq=%22The%20Modern%20Priscilla%22&pg=RA2-PA5#v=onepage&q=%22The%20Modern%20Priscilla%22&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=cns51x3JIWkC&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&dq=%22The%20Modern%20Priscilla%22&pg=RA2-PA5#v=onepage&q=%22The%20Modern%20Priscilla%22&f=false)  
<sup>7</sup> [www.newspapers.com/article/chicago-tribune-modern-priscilla-advert/169094837/](http://www.newspapers.com/article/chicago-tribune-modern-priscilla-advert/169094837/)  
<sup>8</sup> [archive.org/details/ModernPriscilla191905](https://archive.org/details/ModernPriscilla191905)  
<sup>9</sup> [archive.org/details/ModernPriscilla192608](https://archive.org/details/ModernPriscilla192608)  
<sup>10</sup> [archive.org/details/ModernPriscilla192803](https://archive.org/details/ModernPriscilla192803)  
<sup>11</sup> [archive.org/details/ModernPriscilla192208](https://archive.org/details/ModernPriscilla192208)



This issue also contains an article on Batik Art, an ancient art form hailing from Java, Indonesia that creates special designs on a fabric, known as Batik. The process described utilizes linen, silk, or cotton fabrics along with a molten wax, brushes, pens, and dye. The magazine describes it as *“A Delightful Craft Work for Any Woman Possessed of Patience and a Steady Hand. It is Not Difficult and it is Exclusive.”*

[illegible]

Fashion is also a prominent block in the Priscilla lifestyle, including seasonal dresses, and clothing for children. Recipes, of course, are prominent. Featured in this issue are recipes for Escalloped Carrots, Beet and Codfish Balls, Lamb Oriental Style, and multiple recipes for Spinach. On the last page of our publication, there is a section titled “Priscilla Juniors,” yes, indeed, this section was developed to entice the younger females. This section features a puzzle and crafts as well as prize opportunities for young girls who are frequent readers of the magazine.



The *Modern Priscilla* had a wide spread, long run. Its popularity and influence grew to such lengths that in March of 1912 it absorbed the publication *Everyday Housekeeping*, and in May of 1917 *Home Needlework Magazine*.<sup>12</sup> Publications ran until July of 1930, in which the publication merged into Needlecraft, another publication of a similar caliber. However, the importance of the *Modern Priscilla* and other ladies' magazines should not be understated. Thanks to these magazines, contributions to women's and girls' literacy was made. They helped women develop reading habits, and also gave many females an opportunity for work.<sup>15</sup> Overall, the *Modern Priscilla* magazine provided a venue for woman to author articles, as well as share crafts. Through these channels, it helped strengthen the female's position in society by representing her voice, turning the initial 16-page booklet into a magazine with a significant impact on women's history.

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