The Taste of the Times

The house expressed the epitome of upper-middle-class style at the turn of the 20th century. Set back on a small rise above Irwin Avenue (now Aylesboro Avenue) in Squirrel Hill, the brick house, a mixture of architectural styles with its tall chimneys, widow’s walk, and a row of dormer windows across the front, presented a face of respectability and comfortable affluence. Its broad front and side porches were good places to catch the summer breezes, and, since the neighborhood was not yet fully developed, there were still obstructed views down the hill.

When Isaac W. and Tinnie Klee Frank and their three children moved from Sheffield Street in Allegheny City (now the North Side) to this house in Squirrel Hill in 1901, they became part of a demographic trend that shifted the city’s civic center to Oakland, away from the industrialized areas nearest the rivers, and filled in the new residential suburbs of the East End. Isaac, known as “Ike” to his family and friends, was a civil engineer who graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1876, manufactured rolling mill machinery for the steel industry, and was a founding partner in United Engineering and Foundry Company. His parents, William and Pauline Wormser Frank, had been among the first Jewish families to settle permanently in Pittsburgh in the late 1840s. Isaac and Tinnie were both born in Pittsburgh. Tinnie’s father and uncle, Jacob and Joseph Klee (immigrants from Germany, like Isaac’s parents), operated a retail clothing store and owned one of the first local factories that produced ready-made men’s pants. Both families were charter members of Rodef Shalom, the first Jewish congregation in Western Pennsylvania. Rodef Shalom quickly outgrew its second downtown synagogue, constructed in 1901, and moved to an elegant new building on Fifth Avenue at the Shadyside edge of Oakland, not far from the Franks’ new house.

By 1908, the Frank family had settled in and decorated the house to their liking. Amateur photography was by then quite popular, but interiors were tricky to shoot in the low gas lighting or early electrification, so the Franks chose to have the house photographed, inside and out, room by room, by a professional photographer. The stamp on the back of the photographs indicates that the photographer was Philip Brigandi, who spent several years of his very colorful life in Pittsburgh. Brigandi was born in Sicily in 1873 and grew up in Alexandria, Egypt. Educated at an Italian language school there, he showed artistic talent and developed a passion for fencing, which he studied further in the Italian Army and at a specialized fencing academy in Naples where he received the degree of Fencing Master in 1894.

Almost immediately, Brigandi moved to the United States, where he taught fencing at the New York Athletic Club and then at Cornell University. There he experimented with
photography and picked up extra work selling stereoscopic view cards for the Underwood and Underwood Company. He and his wife, Maud Saph, lived in Pittsburgh from 1904 to 1913, then moved to southern California. Brigandi set up home studios in California both for developing his photographs and for teaching fencing (sometimes to Hollywood movie actors). For many years, Brigandi worked as a photographer and salesman for the Meadville-based Keystone View Company, traveling all over the world for photo shoots and settling in Meadville during the 1920s before returning permanently to California.3

In his Pittsburgh years, Brigandi also practiced both careers, with separate listings in city directories as photographer and as fencing master. Brigandi’s photographs of the Frank home are stereographs, a format popularized in the 1850s that used double images, which appeared three-dimensional when seen through a special viewer. Looking at stereographic photographs, either local ones like these or scenes of faraway places, was a popular family entertainment and a significant learning tool in the days before the development of the film industry.

Brigandi’s interior shots of the Frank house have survived in good condition for more than a century and give a clear picture of early 20th-century preferences in interior decoration.4 The furniture, which may seem heavy or fussy to 21st-century tastes, was manufactured in the United States and reflected revivals of European styles and the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement. Artworks, potted plants, and decorative textiles were everywhere, with hardly a surface left uncovered. The Franks did not entertain ostentatiously, but the entry hall and downstairs social rooms would certainly have impressed their guests, while the upstairs bedrooms, each with its fireplace, were less lavishly furnished. Proud of their fashionable home, the Frank family, who had these photographs taken in 1908, and their descendants, who preserved them, have given us a lasting snapshot of one style of Pittsburgh living in the early 20th century.2