

# Basic Detail Report



Title: The Plate of Honor

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Date: 1870

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@28c13

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: "The Plate of Honor", also known as Bringing in the Boar's Head, was sold by Samuel P. Avery and was owned by Edward G. Donnelly of New York in 1872.<sup>1</sup> It was illustrated as plate 24 in a deluxe gift book that contained many of his most important works to date.<sup>2</sup> This volume was undoubtedly published to herald Mayer's return to the United States after his sojourn in Europe. The painting depicts an elegantly attired servant presenting the Christmas "plate of honor," a silver salver supporting a boar's head. The background represents the serving hall of a seventeenth-century manor house. The composition belongs to a historical genre practiced by Mayer's teacher Gustave Brion, who specialized in depictions of the costumes and customs of his native Alsace Lorraine. Also evident is the influence of Ernest Meissonier, whose elaborately detailed and highly colored scenes from French history and literature were favored by Mayer's Baltimore patron William Walters. While the specific literary or historical source for this composition is not known, the ceremony is an ancient one, with origins in Norse mythology relating to Freyr, the Scandinavian god of peace and plenty who rode the boar Gullinbursti. His festival was held at Yuletide, during winter solstice, at which time a boar was sacrificed in his honor. While Mayer may not have known of this Scandinavian tale, he undoubtedly knew of the ritual from Washington Irving's recollection of the ceremony in *The Sketch Book* (1820), which remained in print throughout the nineteenth century. Irving notes that the pageant of "Bringing in the boar's head" was accompanied by the singing of an ode: The boar's head in hand bear I, Bedecked with bays and rosemary; And I pray to you, my masters be merrie, Quot estis in convivio: Caput apri defero, Reddens laudes Domino. The boar's head, as I understand, Is the bravest dish in all the land. When thus bedecked with a gay garland, Let us serve cantico. Caput apri defero, Reddens laudes Domino. This song, first published in 1521 by Wynkn de Worde, is still sung at Christmas at Queen's College, Oxford, and in many communities in America. Mayer's keen observation and imagination blended to create a historical "Christmas card," heretofore unrecognized. REB Bibliography Drawings and Paintings, by Francis B. Mayer (Baltimore, 1872); Henry C. Hopkins, "Maryland's Historical Painter, Frank B. Mayer," *Dixie* 2 (August 1899); ; Bertha L. Heilbron, *With Pen and Pencil on the Frontier in 1851: The Diary and Sketches of Frank Blackwell Mayer* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1932); Jean Jepson Page, "Francis Blackwell Mayer," *Antiques* 109 (February 1976); Jean Jepson Page, "Notes on the Contributions of Francis Blackwell Mayer and His Family to the Cultural History of Maryland," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 76 (September 1981). Among Mayer's own writings pertinent to Maryland are: "Old Maryland Manners," *Scribner's Monthly* 17 (January 1879); "Old Baltimore and Its Merchants," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 60 (January 1880); "The 'Western Shore' of Maryland," *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*

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21 (April 1886). Notes: 1. Madeline Fidell Beaufort et al., eds., The Diaries of Samuel P. Avery, Art Dealer, 1871-1882, Manchester; N. H.: Ayer Company Publishers [Arno], 1979. 2. "Drawings and Paintings by Francis B. Mayer, Photographed by E. Balch, 50 N. Charles Street, Baltimore, 1872." Dimensions: 18 1/4 x 15 3/8 in.