

Interpretations of the colf game in museums

Until some decades ago, people, linked in one way or another to the history of golf, hardly knew the games of colf, crosse and mail. In the course of hundreds of years, there was no research about these games, and therefore, no publications exist. Golf historians always mentioned the games, though only in the margin, probably for completeness sake.

Several authors have published books and papers about colf, crosse, and mail in recent decades. Still, this information does not necessarily reach the people who communicate about these games or neglect this new information. Consequently, new facts are lost, and wrong interpretations continue to exist.

Books about the history of golf and its continental kindred games seldom reach second editions, so there is no possibility of superseding the incorrect views. Many books about golf always include a small chapter about the game's history. With one or two exceptions, this information comes from what the author found in other books and on the internet.

Especially on the internet, websites, including 'Wikipedia', have an extensive readership, and everybody is free to copy information, not knowing if it is correct.

One cannot expect curators of museums to be knowledgeable about all the games pictured in their collections. It is unclear where they look for the information about the artworks.

The following pages show a random selection of misinterpretations from Netherlandish colf paintings in conventional museums. As one can see, knowledge about the centuries-old games of colf and kolf is not universal.

‘Le Louvre’ did not (yet) answer my question
of whether I could publish the painting on my website.

Click here <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010060811> to see the painting

‘Le Louvre’ (Paris) has this painting from Adriaen van de Velde (c1660) with the title *Canal (ou rivière?) gelé avec patineurs et joueurs de hoquet* (Frozen canal (or river?) with skaters and hoquet players).

Possibly, the word ‘hoquet’ derives from an old French word meaning sheep-hook.

The ‘L’Action française : organe du nationalisme intégral’ (25 December 1929) reports from a ‘hoquet’ tournament in Barcelona. The article’s illustration shows ... hockey: several players fighting for the ball.



(Bibliothèque
Nationale de
France, Paris)

Colf clubs were made of wooden shafts with a metal club head since the 15th century. Hockey sticks are all of wooden.

Colf was played from the 13th century in Flanders and the Netherlands until the beginning of the 18th century. During the severe part of the Little Ice Age (approximately between 1550 and 1700), people mainly played the game on the frozen canals, lakes, and rivers.

The colf game has no resemblance or historical relationship with an (ice) hockey game. Hockey is a team sport in which people try to get hold of the ball. In colf, only one person plays the ball at a time.

The men with the metal-headed clubs are playing towards the pole near the man with a dog.

The players on this frozen river (the boards of a canal are straight) are colvers and not of another game.



In the German museum 'Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden' is this painting from Hendrick Avercamp (c1620) with the title '*Kugelspiel auf dem Eis*' (bowls on the ice) on display.

Bowls is an outdoor game in which the player rolls his bowl (ball) toward a smaller stationary ball. The object is to roll one's bowls so they come to rest nearer to the smaller ball than an opponent's.

Our painting shows a man using a stick with a metal head.

The colf player is heading for the pole as in the Louvre painting.



<https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/Details/Index/177040>

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https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1861-1109-80

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The 'British Museum' is inconstant: one picture has a good explanation, the next one is erroneous, for example, in this case: *'View of Zandvliet near Antwerp; people playing hockey and ice-skating on a frozen canal'*.

This print by Jacques Philippe Le Bas (c1748) after Aert van der Neer/Adriaen van Drever shows skaters and some men playing the game of colf with their metal-headed clubs.

It is not clear where the player is heading for.





<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-goyen-a-scene-on-the-ice-near-dordrecht>

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'The National Gallery' (London) describes '*A Scene on the Ice near Dordrecht*' from Jan van Goyen (1642) as follows: '*Barely a third of van Goyen's painting of life on the ice in seventeenth-century Dordrecht shows people; the rest is sky. But he still manages to pack the picture full of incident and humour. Some people squeeze into horse-drawn sledges, while others zoom across the ice or stand and chat. Some play colf, the forerunner of golf – or miss their shot and fall over, watched by an unhelpful dog.*'

I agree: he painted comic scenes, as the two men falling both lose their hats.

The men with the clubs and balls are playing the outdoor game of colf.

Colf the forerunner of golf? Over the years, there have been fierce discussions about the origin of golf: Scottish or continental? At the moment that a man or woman, centuries ago, somewhere in Europe, hit a ball with a bent stick, he or she would certainly not have realised that after many centuries, this action would become a matter of controversy in the golf history world. Studying the numerous publications about this subject, one can conclude that colf was invented in the Low Countries (Flanders and the Netherlands), as golf was independently invented in Scotland. The first mentions of the two games in the local records date from about the same time.



<https://www.museothyssen.org/en/collection/artists/neer-aert-van-der/winter-landscape-skaters-frozen-waterway>

© Carmen Thyssen Collection

The 'Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza' displays *'Winter Landscape with Skaters on a Frozen Waterway'* from Aert van der Neer (c1650/1655).

In the description, we can read: *'One gentleman addresses the ball in a game of colf (the predecessor of modern day hockey and golf), while other groups, one beside a vessel frozen in the ice on the left and another farther back, try their skill at this popular pastime.'*

Concerning hockey, I can repeat the first paragraph of page 3. As for golf, see my comment on page 5.





<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437192>

The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931 - Public domain

The 'The Met Fifth Avenue' (Metropolitan Museum of Art) in New York displays '*Sports on a Frozen River*' by Aert van der Neer (c1660): '*Diminutive figures amuse themselves by skating, sledding, and playing kolf, a game combining features of modern ice hockey and golf.*'

And again, I can refer to: concerning hockey, the first paragraph of page 3. As for golf, see my comment on page 5.

It is unclear where the colver is heading; perhaps one of the trees stumps before him. During play, people decide what will be the goal: a pole, a boat frozen in the ice or ... a tree stump.





<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.50721.html>

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund - Public domain

The 'National Gallery of Art' (Washington) discusses the painting '*A Scene on the Ice*' by Hendrick Avercamp on its website: '*Rich and poor mingle on the frozen waters of a river. From the lower left corner, a man quietly observes the many skaters. At the centre, well-dressed ladies ride in an elegant sleigh driven by a groom; the horse's shoes are spiked for traction on the slippery surface. Two little boys in the right corner play a game of colf (or kolf), a cross between modern-day hockey and golf. And in the background, sledges transport people and commercial goods on the frozen waterway.*'

The name of the game is correct; its explanation is wrong. When one sees a depiction of just two players, one leaning on his club or stick or not using it, one can hardly imagine these boys playing a hockey-like game.

The two boys are playing the Flemish-Netherlandish game of colf.

And again, they are heading for a pole, be it crooked, in front of them.



Conclusion

Outside Flanders and the Netherlands the game of colf is hardly known. When it comes to the stick and ball game, played on the ice during the Little Ice Age (between 1550 and 1700), many people have come across the term but do not know what it means. Or, to say it in a kind Netherlandish proverb (translated literally), having heard the bell ringing but not knowing where the clapper hangs.

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the characters 'c' and 'k' were used indiscriminately in the Netherlandish language. It is not surprising that such name-giving confuses. Steven van Hengel, the Netherlandish colf historian, suggested splitting the spelling in colf for the 'ancient' game and kolf for the 'new' game ('Early Golf', 1982). Although there is no linguistic reasoning for this suggestion, it does clarify the difference between the two games. Following his advice, one can say:

COLF, a long game, was played in the streets and churchyards in the town and later on the roads, tracks and the open acres and fields outside the city walls in the ramparts and moving to the frozen canals, rivers and lakes during the Little Ice Age in the 16th and 17th centuries. The colver played a ball with a curved stick, since the 15th century with a club with a wooden shaft with a metal face, intending to reach a target in the fewest possible strokes. The game began in the Low Countries (Flanders and the Netherlands) in the 13th century. By the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century, the game ceased to exist for several reasons.

KOLF was originally a short game, using the old colf clubs and balls and played in the open air in an alley. Today, the game has developed into an indoor game, using specific kolf clubs, balls and rules, which have no relationship to the ancient long colf game.

In both games, no one fights the ball: only one person plays the ball at a time.

