

Paintings in words

Hendrick and Barent Avercamp

During the Golden Age of the Netherlandish economy, the country became very rich. People wanted to show their wealth in their attire, their houses and especially the decoration of their interiors. Therefore, there was a tremendous demand for tiles and paintings.

Art historians say that in the 16th and 17th centuries, more than eight million paintings were made. There were several kinds of paintings, such as portraits, landscapes, still lifes, genre, etc..

The Avercamp family (uncle and nephew) had specialized in ice landscapes. The Golden Age coincided with the Little Ice Age when ponds, lakes, rivers, and canals were frozen. People loved to skate, sledge, and last but not least, play colf on the ice. Together with several others, Hendrick and Barent produced hundreds of ice scene paintings which they sold very well.



Self-portrait of Hendrick Avercamp, c.1610; at the left a detail from the painting 'Winter landscape with numerous skaters' and a drawing after this detail on the right. – Staatliches Museum Schwerin, Germany

Eye-catchers in the colf paintings and other colf depictions:

- ◆ The game is played mainly by men.



Playing colf on the ice developed into a game of concentration and accuracy, much more than hitting the ball long distances. Colf on the ice started to look like the short colf game. – Detail of the painting 'Diversions on the ice' by Barent Avercamp, c.1655 – Private collection

- ◆ Players use skates or shoes with a kind of anti-slip soles.
- ◆ Colvers mostly play right-handed.
- ◆ The majority of balls looks like leather-covered balls.



Detail of one of the 'Winter Landscape' paintings by Hendrick Avercamp. Several paintings from the early 17th century show that on the ice, colvers were also, or mainly, using whitecoloured (sheepskin) leather balls filled with hair or feathers. – Private collection

- ◆ Most clubs have wooden shafts with metal club heads.
- ◆ The use of all wooden clubs, the so-called cleeks or 'kliks', is exceptional.



Colf player with a colf club that looks somewhat like a 'Scottish cleek'. In the background at the right, a 'ballemerker' shows the player the position of the target. – 'IJsvermaak', drawing by Hendrick Avercamp, c.1620 – Teylers Museum, Haarlem, The Netherlands

- ◆ While swinging, left foot in front of the right foot.
- ◆ Players break their clubs regularly.
- ◆ Players hardly make a full swing.

One of the very few winter scene colf paintings showing a player making a full swing. One should consider it as artistic freedom. Without endangering other people on such a crowded playing field, one cannot hit the colf ball 'out of sight'. – 'Ice scene on the Haarlemmermeer', Hendrick Avercamp, 1625; print maker, Simon Fokke – Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



- ◆ Players make sometimes use of 'caddies' for carrying their clubs and coats and for attending the targets.



This painting shows a young boy standing near the colf player, probably holding the overcoat when the player in the frosty cold is going to strike the ball, obviously the function of a hired colf caddie too. There is no 'ballemerker' visible in the field. – 'Winter Games on the frozen river Ijssel', c.1626, Hendrick Avercamp – National Gallery of Art, Washington, Woodner Collection, Gift of Andrea Woodner

- ◆ *Colvers play a short game.*
- ◆ *Targets are trunks, posts, small boats and un-deep holes.*



Many paintings show well-dressed (bourgeois) people in the forefront because the commercially oriented painters understood that those pictures would sell much better than paintings with commoners. – Barent Avercamp, 'Skaters and colf players on the ice near Kampen', c.1665 – Private collection

- ◆ Players 'putt' standing upright or with straddled legs, and sometimes sitting on one knee.
- ◆ Players are seldom accompanied by women.
- ◆ Aristocrats sometimes are seen on the ice; however, they do not play colf; they don't even have skates on.
- ◆ Presence of 'Koek en zopie' (food and drinks) on the ice.



During the Little Ice Age, the frozen waters were a kind of 'safe haven' against religious laws and council harassments forbidding playing on Sundays. Publicans who saw their customers disappear to the ice followed them by setting up small tents on the ice where the skaters could rest for a while and had a snack or a 'zopie', a warm drink made of beer, rum, eggs, cinnamon and clove. On these Sundays, there was a joyful mood on the ice. –

Antonie van Stralen, c.1639 – www.iceskatesmuseum.com