

## Stick and ball playing putti

By Sara Kieboom-Nijs



**L**OOKING THROUGH MY ARCHIVES, I came across several putti (or cherubs) playing with sticks and balls. They appear in a *Book of Hours* or *Livre d' Heures*, on Delft tiles; in books about sports; on porcelain; and later in papers and advertising. According to the authors and antique sellers, the little children with or without wings, played hockey, lacrosse, jeu de crosse and last but not least: golf.



Detail of the illumination from the 'Heures de la famille Ango', NAL 392, page 130 recto – Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF)

The oldest depiction took me quite some time before I found the original. All the information I had, was: a poor copy from an illumination which should originate from Les Heures d'Angers (book of hours from Angers) in a book of a certain "Mr Gay". To find this depiction on the internet was a real puzzle! I found myself on sites about French car racing (think of the 24 hours of Le Mans), and what do you think of the author's name: Gay?

But that is a recognisable problem. The old games my husband Geert and I have researched gave us a headache: we always had to rack our brains over **crosse** (results in the domain of field crossing, the game 'lacrosse' in Canada and the USA ...), **golf** (not only 'sportive' results but also cars, seas ...), **kolf** (a minor sport in the

Netherlands but the word also means an object to 'kolven': express milk ...), **mail** ... you see the problem?

Anyhow, slow and steady wins the race!

In the end I found the book *Sports & jeux d'exercice en Anjou* of Jean-A. Gay, published in 1947. At the moment, it lies as a trophy on my desk! In spite of the dedication and the ex libris, no one ever read it; most of the pages still have to be cut.

Gay was a little careless: the little "joueurs de crosse" as he calls the players are not in the "*Heures d'Angers*" but in the "*Heures de la famille Ango*".



Regarding the children in the illumination on the previous page, all four are playing with one ball and competing for the ball, probably a kind of early hockey. This illumination was copied and painted around 1514, presumably in Rouen.

The illustrations in this “book of hours” are really remarkable: the number of them as well as the variety.

It is a treasure for those interested in children’s games at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. M. le Comte de Bastard d’Estang, who possessed this beautiful manuscript for a long time, counted 160 groups of children, 956 compositions of all sorts and about 4,000 figures.

Source: *BnF, Département des Manuscrits*

In 1561, Hans Vredeman de Vries, Netherlandish Renaissance architect, painter and engineer, made the design for a canopy to add lustre to the marriage of Duke Karl III of Lothringen with Claude, daughter of King Henri II of France in 1561.

According to Heiner Gillmeister, Karl III could have been a keen golf player, the reason why there are little male figures in the canopy, its composition principally inspired by antique mythology (Pluton and Proserpina).

Source: *Article of Heiner Gillmeister ‘De naakte waarheid over golf’ (The naked truth about golf) in Sportimonium, n° 23, 2003*



*Detail of the canopy. Gillmeister calls the player a golfing putto.  
Gillmeister, Sportimonium n° 23, 2003*

The child uses a stick with a metal head and hits the ball from a tee. Vredeman de Vries (1527-1607) lived in the Netherlands and Flanders, so he was familiar with the game of colf. In that time, people played with wooden clubs with a lead-tin alloy head; the metal was folded around the bent end of the shaft. Looking at the child’s club, Vredeman de Vries almost surely designed a colf player.

The 16th and 17th centuries Netherlandisch delfware, who has never seen a piece of earthenware with this characteristic blue?

In the tiles of that period, one can find a lot of stick and ball playing people, undoubtedly the game of colf. Also, some putti made an effort.

The tiles, shown side by side, look the same. However, there is a difference in the club, the form of the ball that they are playing with, and the physique of the little angels. The third one has a unique design.



*Details of some 17th century Delft tiles (Priv. Coll.)*

And from tiles, we go to an engraving in a French book about the games and pleasures of childhood.



The text on the engraving is a little rhyme:

*Malgré le temps & la saison,  
ceux-ci sortent de la maison,  
& s'en vont crosser par caprice ;  
& la chacun pour le degot  
s'eschauffe, & dans cet exercice  
la crosse leur vaut un fagot.*

Which translates to :

*Despite the weather & the season,  
those children leave the house,  
& the whim struck them to play crosse;  
& each one pushes the ball  
this crosse exercise replaces  
lighting up a bundle of wood.*

I stayed as close as possible to the French text, and with that, I did not respect the rhyme.

All the depicted stick and ball playing children have a stick in their hands, and there is only one ball. They are represented as players who don't wait their turn but play the ball as soon as they can, as confirms the text.

This depiction represents the game of early hockey again.



"*Les Jeux et plaisirs de l'enfance*", after sketches of Jacques Stella; Claudine Bouzonnet-Stella, graveur Paris, Stella, 1657 (BnF, Arsenal)

The following depiction is a large-sized antique porcelain bowl with hand-painted decoration in blue of two children engaged in playing crosse. The Meissen pattern, known as the "Kinder à la Raphaël" (children in the style of Raphael), is first mentioned in the Meissen price list of 1765, and it was produced until c.1799. This bowl carries a reduced version of the Bouzonnet engraving.

Source: <https://www.rubylane.com>

The seller calls the game 'lacrosse', a slip of the pen, I suppose. Lacrosse was played in Canada and North America by Indian tribes. An unlimited number of players on a boundless playing field were fighting during an indefinite period for a ball, using a club something between a large hockey stick and a long tennis racket. Today the game has become popular in Canadian and North American colleges and universities.



Lauret Antiques – 18th century Meissen bowl with children playing crosse (c.1770)  
<https://www.rubylane.com>

The seller of the following engraving calls it: "A very charming late 18th century French engraving of country folks playing La Crosse; possibly one of the earliest depictions of this game!" He does not realise that the anonymous engraver was not at the base of this composition. His creativity is none other than having changed the naked children into well-dressed youngsters and having added another text which reads now:

*Sitôt que la Vendange est faite,  
Le Berger quitte sa houlette,  
Et de la crosse s'exerçant,  
S'échauffe en se divertissant.*

Which translates to:

*As soon as the grape harvest is made,  
The shepherd lays down his crook  
and the crosse game takes place,  
while he warms up enjoying himself.*





<https://www.abebooks.fr/art-affiches/>

The above picture figures also on a “new combination of the game of the jew” (1783), be it in bright colours. In the survey about this game, again, no word about the Stella’s.

Source:

[http://www.giochidelloca.it/storia/VP\\_410.pdf](http://www.giochidelloca.it/storia/VP_410.pdf)

And then we jump into the 20th century.

I have nothing to add to the illustration in Henri-René D’Allemagne’s book *Sports et jeux d’adresse* (Paris, Librairie Hachette & Cie, 1904, pages 207-208).

He simply copied the engraving from 1657 and mentioned: “La crosse d’après une composition de Claudine Bouzonnet Stella, XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle”.

The rhyme disappeared into the text.

One thing is for sure: Claudine did not realise that she would be a trendsetter for the centuries to come!

My pay-off is with two modern putti, shown in the illustrations below, albeit not playing a stick and ball game but watching couples playing golf. They are both acting as caddies.

In the first picture, it looks like the lady is worried about onlookers, or she has lost interest in her admirer.



The second lady shows herself quite “open” when the man makes a pass at her. Indeed, the idea of sharing a glass of champagne after play is very romantic! [see below]



Postcard Champagne Perrier Jouët illustrated by Raymond Peynet, 1969