

## Crosse, too strenuous for women?

The game of crosse was and still is considered by men as being too strenuous for women and not very ladylike. This however doesn't stop them to invite women to come and play with them, unfortunately with little success. For as long as the game of crosse has been portrayed or written about, women are hardly ever mentioned or depicted.

An exception to this rule is found in the 'Valenciennes Book of Hours', called 'Les Heures de Guillaume Bracque' (c. 1520). On one of the folio's of the book a woman is seen striking a teed-up ball with a crosse (a curbed stick).

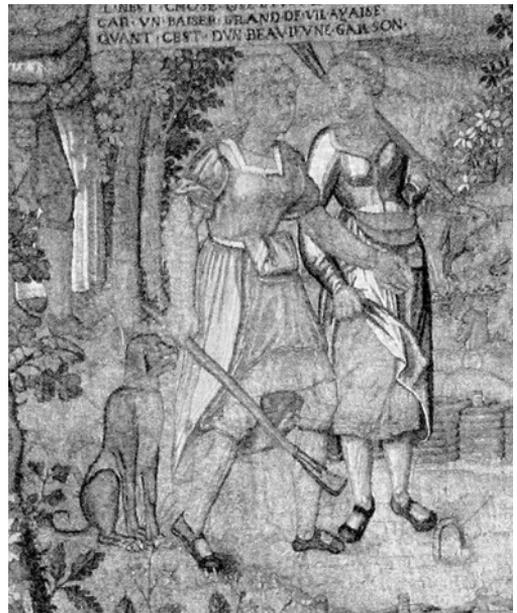


*The oldest presentation of a woman playing 'jeu de crosse' (see right folio, left bottom corner) in a Book of Hours made in Valenciennes, France, in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Valenciennes was in that time, till 1678 part of the Low Countries. –*

*By courtesy of Sam Fogg, London, Great Britain*

Valenciennes lies in the ancient county of Hainaut were according to Alexandre-Joachim Desrousseaux ('Moeurs Populaires de la Flandre Française' (Popular customs in French Flanders), 1889), this game was very popular in 14<sup>th</sup> century, obviously also for women.

A more recent depiction of women playing a kind of jeu de crosse is in the tapestry 'La peinture des Amours de Gombaut et Macée' (Portrait of the love affairs of Gombaut and Macée), displayed in the 'Musée des Beaux Arts' in Saint Lô, France. This tapestry, made in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, shows two country girls, playing a game with the name of 'tiquet', a shortened version of jeu de crosse.



*Detail of the famous tapestry 'La Peinture des Amours de Gombaut et Macée', produced in Flanders in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Two shepherdesses and a shepherd are playing a game called 'tiquet', a jeu de crosse variant that looks like ground billiard. – By courtesy of Musée des Beaux-Arts, Saint Lô, France*

One of the oldest written references to women playing the game of crosse is from Madame Albertine Clément-Hémery ('Histoire des fêtes civiles et religieuses, des usages anciens et modernes du département du Nord', 1834) who described that in the past, in certain regions of Avesnois (ancient county of Hainaut), girls played the game of crosse together in the fields, but only on Shrove Tuesday. Men and boys played this game exclusively the rest of the year.

Zéphyr-Joseph Piérart confirms her observation when he mentions in his 'Guide complet du touriste, de l'archéologue, de l'industriel et du commerçant' in 1862, that in some parts of the Avesnois region, young women played the game of crosse.

On Shrove Tuesday the unmarried young women gathered at the pastures around the towns and villages, to play crosse together or sometimes even against the young men. Piérart thought it titillating to see girls playing a game that was only meant for boys and men.

Alexandre-Joachim Desrousseaux wrote in ‘Moeurs Populaires de la Flandre Française: “For my part, I do not know a more amusing game, men, women and children, everybody drives his ball as he or she pleases.”

He refers to a certain Doctor Bourgogne (*Histoire de Macou*, 1885, serial in *Courier de l’Escaut* in Condé France), who told us that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century according to old traditions boys and girl played together the game of crosse in the fields, on Ash Wednesday.

Desrousseaux also mentions that on Shrove Tuesday in the cantons Bavay and Berlaimont (Avesnois) women played the game of crosse at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1898, René Minon explained in ‘La vie dans le Nord de la France au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle’ (Life in northern France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) that on the name day of St. Catharine and during Carnival women played ‘jeu de crosse en plaine’ (field crosse), like the men, with iron crosses and wooden balls. In some municipalities the girl who was the most skilful in the game became the queen of the (dance) ball that she would open in the evening.

A similar observation was made already in 1834 by the above mentioned Madame Albertine Clément-Hémery: in Berlaimont and other towns all girls came together on the name day of St Catherine. After the mass they went to a large field where they played the game of crosse with such vigour that you almost could have doubts about them being girls. The winner of the match would become the queen of all dance balls of the year were she would be present for the contra dance.

On the same day, the young ladies played for the privilege to choose a dance partner. The boys were sitting around the dance floor waiting for an invitation. The girls paid for the music and the refreshments.

This remarkable custom happened also at the octave of the annual village feast. This custom is very old.

In 1900, Jules Dewert, wrote an article named ‘Jeu de crosse’ in ‘Wallonia, recueil de littérature orale, croyances et usages traditionnels. He told that in the Borinage and the arrondissement of Ath, women played crosse on Ash Wednesday with wooden balls as big as two fists. They played with wooden crosse clubs.