

'Caveat Emptor' Buyers & Sellers Beware

By Geert & Sara Nijs

offer helpful advice to both buyers and sellers

EVERY now and again auction houses offer for sale clubs and balls once used in the continental golf-like games colf (or kolf), crosse (or chole or choule) and mail (or pall mall).

The way in which these rather exceptional collectables are named and described by the renowned auctioneers shows that there is limited knowledge of these games and the equipment used. The auctioneers probably use the information provided by their clients. It seems that sometimes these clients may be rather ignorant about what they have collected or found.

This equipment offered occasionally could be called 'the odd man out' in the never-ending avalanche of golf clubs, balls, books, paintings, documents and memorabilia. Still golf collectors sometimes would like to have such an exceptional piece of historical equipment in their collection linked so closely to golf. For the serious collectors it is important to know what kind of game we are talking about, which are the clubs and balls used, when and where were they used and whether they are rare or rather common.



Fig 1 A well-known auctioneer offered 'Two Early Dutch Chloe golf clubs'. This is not correct. The clubs offered are 'crochetons', clubs used in the French-Belgian game of crosse (chole or choule).

Lack of information and knowledge

As explained above most auctioneers are not (yet) able to provide the necessary information. Also antique dealers have insufficient knowledge of what they occasionally have to offer in this field. In museums sometimes paintings or drawings of the games are exhibited. Unfortunately the knowledge of most curators about the games shown is as restricted as that of the auctioneers. (See Figs 1, 2 and 3)

Books about the history of golf, with some minor references to the continental games, are not quite as informative about the games and their equipment. Until recently research has never been undertaken to find out more about the history of colf, crosse and mail. So it was difficult to find out more. Therefore looking in antique book shops, second-hand book shops and on the internet or even at 'boot sales' one is in vain in trying to enrich knowledge for the collectors.

It was in 1982 that for the first time Steven van Hengel in his book 'Early Golf' explained some historical details about the game of colf and about the clubs and balls used.

It took until 2008 when a study was published about the past and present of the game of crosse. In this book 'CHOULE - The Non-Royal but most Ancient Game of Crosse' extensive information is given about the clubs (crosses) and balls (choulettes). French language edition was published in 2012. In 2011 and



Fig 2 Another well-respected auctioneer offered a 'chole club with seven chole balls and four other balls'. This is not correct. The seven balls are probably 'jeu de mail' or 'jeu de boule' balls. The other four balls are the real 'chole' (crosse) balls recognizable by their ellipsoid shape. These are still used in Belgium.



Fig 3 A renowned museum explained that the two boys in the detail of the painting play 'kolf, a cross between modern-day hockey and golf'. This is not correct. The game played is the Flemish-Netherlandish game of colf played since the 13th century until the beginning of the 18th century both on land and on ice.

2014, the studies 'Games for Kings and Commoners' Part One respectively Part Two were issued which included detailed information about clubs and balls used in the continental games and their development over the course of the centuries. These books should be of great help to both auctioneers and collectors to find out more about the collectables offered.

Knowing that new information takes often a long time to arrive at the desk of the interested people, we would like to explain in a few words and pictures the quintessence of the clubs and balls used in these ancient 'golf-like' games.

Colf

Colf was played in Flanders and the Netherlands from the 13th



Fig 4 On the website of a leading golf museum a club is shown which is called a 'jeu de mail club'. A tile shows the game of 'kolf or jeu de mail'. This is not correct. The club shown is a 'crocheton' (club) used in the game of crosse. The picture in the Delft Blue tile shows a game of 'beugelen', a Flemish-Netherlandish variant of lawn billiards.

century until the early 18th century. Players used wooden balls of different sizes and since the 17th century also hair-filled leather balls. One or two excavated specimens may be found only in museums. It is documented that already at the beginning of the 15th century clubs had metal heads made of lead, lead-tin alloy, bronze and brass. The shaft was made of ash. Complete clubs have never been on the market. (See Figs 5 and 6)

Kolf evolved from the outdoor and ice colf game at the end of the 17th century and is played as an indoor game in the Netherlands.



Fig 5 Complete colf clubs have so far only be found during the excavation of a 16th century cargo ship in the impoldered IJsselmeer. The clubs are preserved by the Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed at Lelystad, The Netherlands.



Fig 6 The 'pin' club head (left) is the oldest example of a colf head (15th or 16th century). Such heads have never been offered for sale by auctioneers or antique dealers. The club heads made of lead or lead-tin alloy (middle) are found regularly in the Netherlands. Such clubs mainly date back to the 17th century. They are sold mainly on E-Bay or the Netherlandish Marktplaats equivalent. Brass club heads (right) are fairly seldom. At an auction some years ago such copper club heads, found in a shipwreck, near the Shetlands, were bought for several thousands of pounds



Fig 7 Three examples of club heads used since the end of the 18th century in the successor of the field and ice colf game in the court colf game played both in-and out-doors. Such clubs are still made today for the few players of this game.

Originally colf clubs were used. The size of such club head is larger than 10 centimetres. In the course of the centuries clubs grew in size and look different from the colf clubs. Such clubs are still produced. Balls are considerably bigger in size and made of sagathy or rubber. Such balls are still produced. (See Fig 7)

Mail (pall mall)

Pallio maglio is originally an Italian game that entered France in the 16th century (jeu de mail) and spread all over western Europe under the names pall mall (English), maliën (Netherlandish), etc., from the early 17th century until the end of the 18th century. The game was played with wooden balls, varying in size, and wooden clubs consisting of a wooden (mostly



Fig 8 The 'jeu de mail' (pall-mall) game was once very popular with kings and commoners, especially in France. Because the game lost the interest of most players at the end of the 18th century most clubs were eaten by the wood worms. Clubs in a good condition are sometimes offered at auctions. A club is more valuable when the name of a famous club maker (for instance, Coste, Grasse or Richard) is marked on the club head.



Fig 10 The crocheton (left) is the ancient club in the game. Since mid-20th century such clubs are not made anymore because they are too vulnerable when using the extreme hard nylon ball. These clubs are becoming quite rare. The successor, the manchon (right), is still made and used. The crocheton is rarer and therefore more valuable than the contemporary manchon.



Fig 9 Crosse balls (choulettes) are recognisable for their elliptical shape. From left to right you see a golf ball, an original boxwood ball, a modern official choulette made of horn beam, used in France, a nylon ball for teeing-off and a 'pressed wood' ball for in the field, used in Belgium. Such balls are made in different sizes, except for the boxwood ball; the other choulettes are used today.

ash) shaft and a cylindrical wooden club head. Such clubs and balls are sometimes for sale at auctions or on E-Bay. (See Fig 8)

Crosse

Crosse (chole or choule in English) is played in the Belgian Borinage and the French Avesnois region since at least the 14th century. The balls (choulettes) have an ovoid shape and are made of wood with knife-cut 'dimples', grooves or ridges. In the Belgian crosse region balls of different sizes, also made of nylon or pressed wood, are used. (See Fig 10) The clubs (croses) have a wooden shaft and a metal club head with two faces. The original joint of shaft and head is the insertion of a bent ash stick straight into the opening at the rear end of the head. Such a club is named a 'crosse à brochon' or a 'crocheton'. Half-way through the 20th century the straight end of the shaft entered into a socket which is welded onto the crosse head. This so-called 'crosse à manchon' is still made by private artisans. Especially with these crosse clubs there is some confusion. This crosse game was never played in Flanders or the Netherlands but only in Belgian Wallonie and French Avesnois. These clubs are certainly not golf, nor mail, colf or kolf clubs. (See fig 10)

We are not collectors so we have no knowledge about the guide prices for the clubs and balls. Over the last few decades we have amassed knowledge about these ancient continental golf-like games, which we would like to share with you. For more detailed information about these games and their equipment, do not hesitate to contact us at ancientgolf@wanadoo.fr or have a look at our website www.ancientgolf.dse.nl.