

L'hombre is alive (in Denmark and elsewhere)

Written by Hans Otto Lunde

A roar of laughter could be heard from the large dining room next door. I was on the floor reading a Donald Duck magazine in the living room where the women were knitting and talking. The year was 1970 in the southern part of the island of Funen, Denmark. I was then an 8 year old boy, living on a farm with my parents and two brothers. In the dining room, the men had retreated after the family dinner to play L'hombre, as they always did. I didn't understand this fascination with L'hombre at the time. My father was there with my grandfather. My uncle Helge was there, a very skilled player, and also my uncle Finn, who was practically forced to learn the game when he married my

mother's younger sister Else. He was playing in a very different way from the virtuoso Helge. He relied on his intuition instead of trying to count trumps and keep track of everything else. There was also a woman playing, my German teacher from school, Ms. Larsen, who was respected and almost feared by the children. And then there was my younger brother, Sten. He was helping my grandfather during the game by managing his payment chips. When grandfather lost, Sten would take chips and sometimes old metal coins from grandfather's chip box on the table and give the other players their due payments. And when he won, Sten would collect from the other players and make sure

Fig. 1. During a heat wave around 1972 the L'hombre players are at it again – this time at the beach where they have retreated into the water to play their beloved game. Leftmost, uncle Finn is looking towards the camera. Rightmost, always with the pipe in his mouth, uncle Helge is astutely observing the game. My father, Knud, is no. 3 from the left. During a L'hombre-game only 3 players are active. Here they play



6-man-L'hombre in a round-robin fashion, so that two games are taking place at all times. Each player gets to play with the two players to the left and to the right of him during the course of a L'hombre session lasting maybe 2-3 hours – or more.

The photo was taken at the beach near Nyborg, situated at Store Bælt, the strait separating Funen and Zealand.

that they all paid the correct amount according to the contract played.

Years later Sten told me what caused all this laughter. Grandfather had won a hand that should normally be abandoned for its obvious weakness and inability to win. "What on earth possessed you to play such a terrible hand?", Kristian, the last player in the room and the gentle husband of the tough Ms. Larsen, asked my grandfather. My grandfather answered: "Not all the cards in the talon were sold in this game, and I thought I could tell by the lad's expression that there were some important cards missing!".

In L'hombre there are some contracts in which players are allowed to exchange some of their cards for new ones. There are 13 of these "exchange" cards which can be "bought" from the talon and in this case not all of them were taken. Sten had looked at the abandoned talon cards – and my grandfather had looked at Sten, and interpreted Sten's expression in a way that made him take a chance on playing these unwinnable cards.

So although he was only 7 years old, Sten did not just handle chips. He understood this rather complicated game quite well – well enough to tell which cards were important and which were not.

The joyful game

L'hombre has been played in Denmark for maybe 300 years or more. We have written sources of the game's existence in Denmark going back to at least around the start of the 1700s. Before the Second World War it was the leading game, especially in the rural parts of the country, played mainly by the lower part of the bourgeoisie. In some novels you will hear that in small towns the local priest would meet with the schoolteacher, the veterinarian and maybe a few estate-owners to play L'hombre. Later the game would be on the defensive due to the rise in popularity of Whist and Bridge, the latter having many books and other resources devoted to it. But the game would not die, and it is still played by many people all over our small country, though unfortunately this number has become progressively smaller in recent years.

In this article I will not explain the rules of the game. This is covered by many other sources. Instead I will try to explain the status and health of the game as of 2024 in Denmark.

L'hombre is a strange card-game if you are accustomed to Bridge for example. The ranking of cards is completely different and changes depending on the bid. The game is played using only 40 cards, 8, 9 and 10 are omitted, and everything progresses counter-clockwise during the game. So it takes some effort to learn how to play. It is not as complicated as it is sometimes made out to be, but to play it well can be a life-long endeavour.

I recall playing with my school principal as a young man. I, my brother Mogens and a very close friend, Kent, learned the game thanks to my brother Sten, who was assisting my grandfather and learned the game this way. When we were around 16 years of age Sten, Kent and I joined the local L'hombre club, where we would



Fig. 2. The former foreign minister and now recently deceased Uffe Elleman Jensen plays L'hombre with some friends in the south of France during a holiday. Uffe, wearing a yellow shirt, liked the game and knew that he was not terribly good at it. Before entering politics he worked as a journalist often at Christiansborg, where the Danish parliament is located. He recalls: 'When I was a journalist at Christiansborg in the 60s and early 70s, it happened that I was summoned as the fourth man in the members' rooms where games were played. It was said about the MP's who played that they "were at a meeting of the Hymn-Book Committee" when someone called from outside...'

meet some very good players and learn from them. But my school principal, Mr. Andersen, also attended the club, and he was a terrible L'hombre player. He was a nice and very skilled man, but he simply did not get the intricacies of the game. I remember that it was difficult to play with him, because I couldn't really tell him the truth: "Andersen, you old fool, why didn't you play clubs?" Even if it was expressed more politely, it could maybe have caused me some trouble at school...

Some players never really seem to get "inside" the game and understand its mechanics. But then again, there are other reasons to play than being good at it and winning. Social reasons, for example.

The social side of playing L'hombre is maybe its most important quality. I've often heard it said that if you have two card tables, one where Bridge is played and one where L'hombre is played, you will hear laughter and banter from the L'hombre table and nothing but silence from the Bridge table. This is obviously not quite fair to Bridge, but there is definitely some truth to it. This is reflected in the way tournaments are conducted in these two games, for example. Both games use "duplicate form", but in a L'hombre tournament the players, teammates and opponents alike, are allowed to talk to each other and have a good time during the match, without revealing information about their cards, of course. This is not the case in a Bridge tournament, unfortunately.

L'hombre is a gentleman's game, and it is played "privately" for fun and maybe some money. And since around 1950 it has also been played in a tournament form. More about that later.

"Private" L'hombre is not played for high stakes today. Playing for some money is fun, as long as it does not amount to huge sums. But there are reports from the old days, that farms,

livestock and sometimes servants changed hands because of L'hombre. This is not the case anymore, to my knowledge.

Adding some money can also prevent some players from misbehaving. During a L'hombre-game, three players are active, one playing against the two others. The player who is "alone" is the L'hombre, the "man", as the name originates from the Spanish word for man, hombre. Some players simply want to be "the man" all the time and don't care if they lose, which is irritating and rude in my opinion.

My grandfather used to say that you should not "defy the cards", and I absolutely agree. It has also been said that L'hombre was invented by monks in Spain. They were just supposed to pray and work – not to play cards and participate in other sinful activities such as logical thinking. This is supposedly the reason why there are only three active players and one idle player during a typical L'hombre-game. The idle player is supposed to keep watch and make

sure that the abbot does not show up and discover what is going on... In defence of these monks, it is said that for them playing L'hombre was a kind of meditative, almost stoic exercise, where one should submit to one's fate – and NOT defy the cards!

L'hombre gets organized – and divided

From its origin in Spain, L'hombre quickly spread to other countries in the western part of Europe and arrived in Denmark at the end of the 17th century, maybe around 1685. It became very popular and through the years a myriad of variations in rules developed in the different regions of Denmark. This also happened in other countries, and there is a belief that this was the reason for the game's eventual demise, because it changed so much in some places that it developed into completely different games.

In 1950 a meeting was arranged in Fredericia and here the Danish L'hombre Association (DLA) was founded. Its mission was to be an



Fig. 3. The "monk-myth" reflected in this poster from the Danish L'hombre Association. Slogan: "an old game in modern times".

umbrella organisation for the different L'hombre clubs around the country. The result was: 7 board-members, 0 attached clubs and a cash sum of 0.00 Danish kroner, not a very promising start.



Fig. 4. Players participating in the Danish L'hombre championships using “duplicate form”.

But this did get better rather quickly and the association could start its work. This has to this day been to arrange the Danish championships and assist clubs around the country. The precise definition of the rules for L'hombre also became important, and you can read from the start of the organisation's work, that the “purification” of L'hombre was an important mission, to “root out” all the regional differences in rules, so to say. To play a tournament one has to agree on the rules, of course, so there are many good reasons to define a common standard version of L'hombre. But this also led to a kind of divide in Danish L'hombre-culture, where the “fine” L'hombre-players use the DLA-rules while the regional “gamblers” use rules that have been tweaked to put more weight on the gambling

aspect of L'hombre and less on the “skill” of the game. This is my personal opinion on the matter, but there is little doubt that the divide is a reality.

Shortly after the founding of the DLA, similar sub-associations were founded on Funen and in Jutland - but not in Zealand. And to this day there are many L'hombre players in Zealand, but they are not organised by the DLA and they do not play duplicate tournaments. In their tournaments they play for points in various ways, but not in a way where players from different teams play the same cards.

Being a rather recent member of the board of the DLA, I find it very important to address this divide, to see if we can somehow bridge the gap between the different cultures, for reasons I will explain in the next chapter.

Why we fight

In recent years it has become increasingly difficult to recruit new players. Playing traditional card games is not a part of popular culture, especially youth culture, in Denmark any more, so the number of players has dropped slowly but steadily. We don't know exactly how many L'hombre players there are in Denmark, but we know that we have around 650 players in the DLA in about 20 clubs, and this number is on its way down. There are many more players in the country, but they are not organised.

That playing traditional card games is not so common any more has many reasons, but probably the most important one is the emergence of the Internet. This offers so many possibilities for entertainment that competing with it is difficult, and we have really not been aware of this threat until now. Also, we are not the only organisation that struggles. The Danish Bridge Association has around 20,000 members, which of course is many more, but they feel the pressure too. In another line of games, the Danish Chess Association also faces the realities of the modern world with its about 4000 members.

It should be noted that another reason for the decline in members is the reluctance of modern Danes to be members of clubs. Denmark is

known for a huge number of small associations of all kinds, but being a member often comes with some kind of obligation to attend the club activities on a regular basis, and modern Danes seem to have so many things to do that they do not wish to commit to this.

L'hombre is a unique game and is in many ways the mother of all modern card games, as it is the first game where bidding was introduced. It is a faster game than Bridge, as each player only has 9 cards, and it has an aspect of randomness or chance to it that you do not find in Bridge or Whist, because of the talon, from which the players in some contracts are allowed to “buy” new cards. Therefore a “good” team can sometimes lose to a team that is considered worse, even when playing duplicate. The talon makes it possible to be “lucky” so to say. But the talon also adheres to the laws of probability, so if a really good team plays a bad team 10 times they will win 8 or 9 times. The better technical card skills of the good team will prevail, and their knowledge of statistics will “punish” the bad team – in the long run.

So L'hombre is a really entertaining game to play on any level. It varies from quick, easy games ending with a lot of laughing because of some crazy outcome to games where the players are sometimes stuck for minutes in deep contemplation of their options, considering what has happened in the game until now, and what to do next. L'hombre's mix of complexity and chance puts it in a unique place among card games. It has the best qualities of Bridge and a bit of Poker in the same game.

So we think it is worth fighting for the game's survival. Personally, I can't bear the thought of it disappearing. But we will have to come up with new ideas, and also emphasize the game's proud cultural heritage and history. I for one try to teach the game to youngsters, as I teach

in a special kind of school, a Danish folk-high-school. And it is indeed possible to transfer the qualities of this fascinating game to newer generations. But it takes effort and patience.

Also we try to be present on the Internet. The DLA and different clubs have home pages of course, but there are currently also two ways to play online L'hombre against other players, with emphasis on different things. One makes it possible to also play against the computer, the other has its focus on mimicking the physical experience of a card table as much as possible by using an embedded video meeting amongst other things. See the web addresses at the end of the article.



Fig. 5. Four youngsters playing L'hombre using “duplicate form” at Egmont Højskolen, December 2022.

Collector of L'hombre-related artifacts

I'm fully aware that the magazine in which you are reading this article has its main focus on the playing-cards themselves and not so much on the games we play with them. My focus is obviously on the particular game called “L'hombre”. But we do have people in the L'hombre community, who are interested in playing-cards and other things related to L'hombre.

One of them is Aksel Højgård, who is a very good L'hombre player and former champion of Denmark and Funen. He has a very large collection of L'hombre-related items.

We'll show a small sample of them here:



Fig. 5. Aksel Højgård.



Fig. 7. Jetons in bone decorated in the four colours with funny pictures; "counting" coins in copper with colours.



Fig. 6. L'hombre box in mahogany with porcelain-glazed aces; card press in brass; various editions of old L'hombre-cards with only 40 cards in the pack. (1910-1960, by Adolph, Wulff, Holmblad, Krucko, Warburg and other publishers.



Fig. 8. A very special porcelain piece, supposedly showing the "inventors" of L'Hombre with cards in their hands. Even some beer has made its way onto the table... Considering the Spanish origin, perhaps it should have been wine instead?

The Peruvian connection

Some time ago I was contacted by an American of Peruvian descent named Juan-José Rebaza. He lives in California and plays cards, specifically Rocambor. The contact came about because he is determined to keep Rocambor alive and has been researching other people playing this game in the world. During his investigation he stumbled upon my online L'hombre system and wanted to use it to play Rocambor with his uncles from Peru.



Fig. 9. Here, from left to right, Juan-José, an American friend, Glenn, and the three uncles – Roberto, Carlos, and Hernan – are ready at a “real” Rocambor table. Picture taken in Lima, Peru, March 2022.

Rocambor is basically the same as our L'hombre. The core of the game is the same, but there are also some small differences that I will explain later.

Juan-José explained that they had been playing Rocambor over the internet during Covid. “OK”, I said, “how did you do it?” Then he explained that they had used a video meeting, Google Meet, to talk and see each other. “And then we used WhatsApp to hand out cards”, said Juan-José. WhatsApp is a messaging app a bit like Facebook’s Messenger. I replied: “How on earth is that to be understood?” And Juan-José explained: “The dealer shuffled and dealt cards at home, and then took a picture of the other players’ 9 cards and sent these pictures to the respective players individually via WhatsApp. Keep in mind, in Rocambor the dealer does not

deal himself any cards and is called “Zangano”, which in Spanish means a person that does nothing. Then the individual players used the picture received via Whatsapp to find their cards themselves from a deck of cards they had at home. After that, they could communicate their play to each other over the video conference.” I replied that it was pretty much the craziest thing I had heard of since Trump ran for president in the United States, but also that it showed a great deal of ingenuity and love for the card game Rocambor. And we L’hombre players understand and respect that a lot.

Juan-José and I have been in contact ever since. The online e-L'hombre system has been equipped with the possibility of using Spanish cards as well as Spanish and English languages. We have also played online L'hombre together with my brother Sten and some of Juan-José’s uncles, and we had a great time.

So L'hombre lives in America under the name Rocambor, primarily in Peru and Bolivia. The game migrated to the New World with players from Spain and has survived until now, which is good news for us L'hombre enthusiasts in Denmark. We do have someone with whom we can fight for the survival of the game, and we can play cards together just fine.

We can easily play by their rules and they by ours, since Rocambor is the same as L'hombre with some exceptions and additions:

- The bid of Nolo (where the “man” must not take any tricks) is not allowed in Rocambor family tradition rules, so in that way Rocambor is closer to the original L'hombre than the Danish version of the game.

- When the opponents buy, the player who turns to buy first can “push” the talon over to the next opponent, to allow that player to buy first. This player can decline and push the talon back.

- The rule that in certain cases you do not need to follow suit with “matador” trumps is different. In Juan-José’s family the Spadille, the Ace of spades, is the only Matador which does not have to follow suit.

- Gold coins (oros) are the “preferred” suit in Rocambor, just like spades are in our game. So their “better” game is with gold coins as trump.

- As mentioned before, in Rocambor you deal to the right and the dealer does not play. In contrast to this, in L'hombre the dealer also deals to the right, but plays as well.

- Perhaps the biggest difference, which is actually not really a difference, is that in the Spanish-speaking countries you play with a different kind of cards. They also have 40 cards, 9 for each player and 13 in the deck, but the cards have different images.

Our “international” cards may partly be a result of the French Revolution, when everything had to be put into a system. So the symbols for spades, clubs, diamonds and hearts were simplified and the cards became symmetrical so that it didn't matter which end of the card was face up.

A Spanish deck of cards has always been divided in 4 suits, called: Copas (cups), Oros (“golds” or gold coins), Bastos (clubs) and Espadas (swords). These symbols supposedly represented the 4 social classes of feudal society: clergy/church, merchants/bourgeois, peasantry/working class and military/nobility. The Spanish cards have preserved old symbols for the different suits (Tab. 1):

So their cards look something like those in Fig. 10 (there are different variations).

Note that the cards are not symmetrical and that they do not have a queen, but two “jacks” of different value. The three face-cards are the “sota”, which is similar to the jack and generally

depicts a page or squire, the “caballo” (literally the horse) which is the knight, and the “rey” (king).

For my own part, I would probably be able to play with these cards, but it takes some getting used to, since the regular cards are almost a part of my body by now(!), and the Spanish-speaking players feel the same way about our cards.

Fortunately it has been relatively easy to change the online L'hombre-system so that you can choose which cards you want to play with. And you can play with different sets of cards at the same time. So if I play with the Spanish-speaking players, I see the cards I'm used to on my screen, and they see their cards. If I play the four of spades, for example, I see a “normal” four of spades, and the Spanish players see a card with 4 swords. And the other way around.

Fig. 11 shows a screenshot taken by Juan-Jose of the e-L'Hombre system with Spanish cards.

I don't quite know what we can use this Spanish-speaking connection for yet. But in any case, I think it is exciting to have made contact with L'hombre players in another part of the world. And Juan-José and I intend to keep in touch and play cards together from time to time. And who knows, maybe we can play an international match against Peru at some point! I am also sure that there will be an opportunity for you to get to know players from the other side of the Atlantic, if you wish.

	H hearts Corazones	D diamonds Diamantes	C clubs Treboles	S spades Espadas
French				
	C copas Cups	O oros Golds	B bastos Clubs	E espadas Swords
Spanish				

Tab. 1

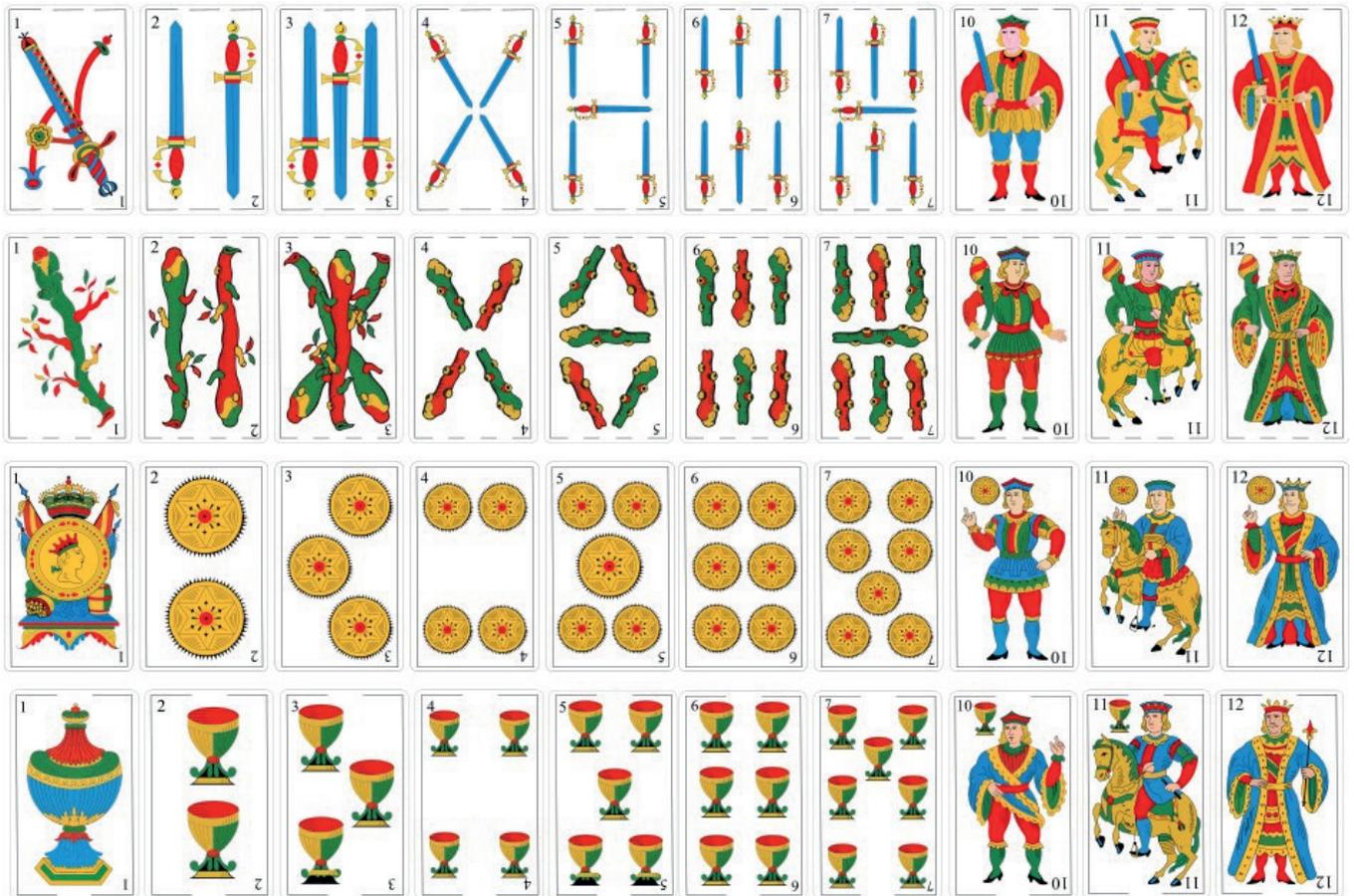


Fig. 10



Fig. 11. Here, from the top, Hernan, Roberto, & Carlos playing Rocambor using e-lhombre. Screenshot taken January 2023.

To finish my little tale of the state of the L'hombre game, I will encourage anybody who would like to know more about this very old, fascinating and foundational game to contact me or anyone else in the Danish L'hombre Association. Our website is here:

<https://lhombre.dk>.

If you would like to learn how to play it by playing it(!), we would love to teach you by using our online system at: <https://e.lhombre.dk>, which is free for anybody to use, by the way, programmed by me.

The other online system, where you play “silently” against other humans or just the computer, can be found at this web address: <https://www.netlhombre.dk>. It was programmed by Henrik Gliese.

Also there is a YouTube channel where the rules of the game are explained in 6 videos, and there are other videos that explain and analyse various interesting or difficult deals. The lan-

guage is Danish, but I plan to construct subtitles in other languages.

Find the “L'hombre channel” here: <https://www.youtube.com/@lhombre-kanalen9722>

You can watch me and my brother Sten play with Juan-José Rebaza (using English language) here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_SFo-vtkK-rw

From my childhood I still recall the L'hombre-players laughing and enjoying themselves.

And now, more than 50 years later, I still play tournaments with my two brothers, Sten and Mogens and our “brother-in-cards”, Kent. We enjoy each other's company, and we still LOVE playing L'hombre.

Greetings from Denmark to all playing-card-loving readers!

Hans Otto Lunde