

# The Scientology of Selling

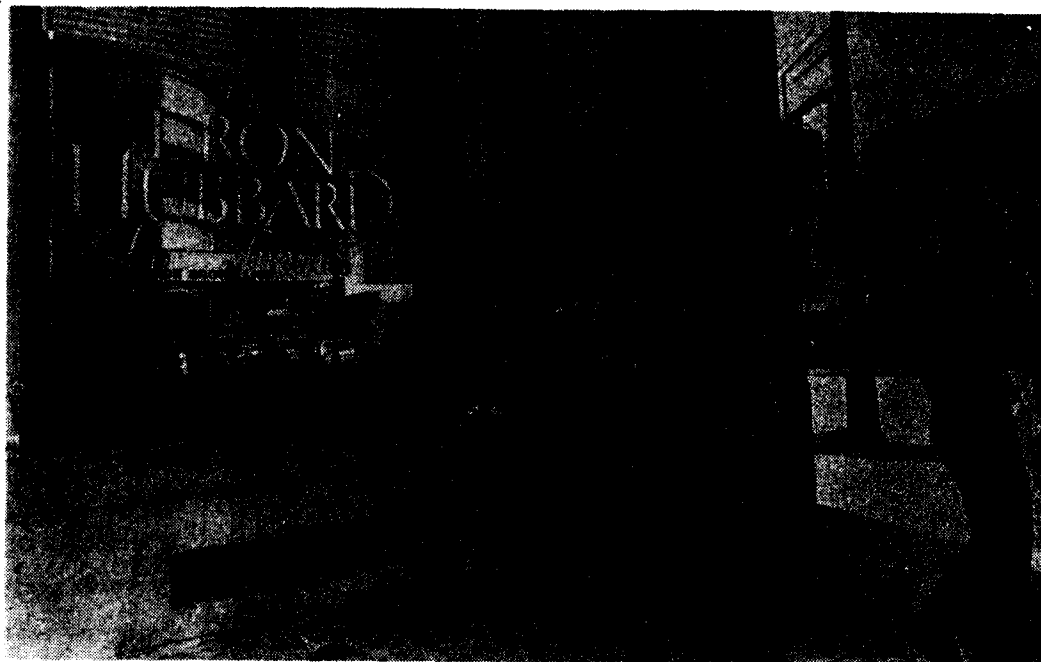
*The Hubbard is bare*

27 ART

"The L. Ron  
Hubbard Life  
Exhibition"

BY RALPH RUGOFF

Welcome to  
the jungle.



BY RALPH RUGOFF

**O**ARRIVED FOR MY APPOINTMENT AT THE L. RON Hubbard Life Exhibition Hall a few minutes early. Unlike in other commemorative mausoleums, such as the Nixon Library and Birthplace, you're not allowed to walk around the Hubbard by yourself. Instead, you must sign up for an hour-and-a-half guided tour. Possibly they don't trust the unassisted viewer to fully reap the museum's rewards, though it might also be a matter of security. The presence of a young guard dressed in the Church of Scientology's special uniform, a khaki outfit appropriate for a paramilitary force, suggests the latter. Wordlessly presiding over the defense of the lobby is a bust of Hubbard himself, his open, toothless mouth suggesting the appearance of a hooked bass.

It doesn't seem like a very respectful way to represent a cult icon, but then, even a quick walk around the lobby tells you that this isn't your run-of-the-mill Graceland. While places like Las Vegas' Liberace Museum seem content to promote the glory of a dead celebrity, the Hubbard's mission of veneration is complicated by an agenda of salesmanship. Where you might expect to find a bronze plaque listing museum founders, there is a wall of testimonial quotations celebrating Scientology, including statements from Tom Cruise, John Travolta and Sonny Bono. Books with fiery covers, filling several racks, promote Hubbard's achievements as sci-fi author and Scientology founder. While waiting for my tour guide, I am subjected to a video display advertising the museum I'm already in.

On entering the Life Exhibition Hall, my first impression is of a brightly colorful children's museum, an impression further reinforced by a pair of painted model airplanes (one-fourth actual size) that fly above an exhibit chronicling Hubbard's feats as an aviator. My fears of being run through a thinly disguised brain laundry are put to rest by the first display, an innocent-looking collection of artifacts from Hubbard's boyhood. A Boy Scout sash with merit badges, a bugle and photos of Blackfoot Indians, who allegedly made the 6-year-old Hubbard an honorary tribal member, forge a model of an ideal Western childhood.

This relatively uncommercial interlude is abruptly shattered as my guide, who throughout the hour-and-a-half tour steadfastly main-

tains the rictus grin of a hardened stewardess, waves her remote control unit at a horizontal screen, triggering an audio-visual onslaught with all the bombast of a Desert Storm promo. Its objective is to repackage Hubbard as a multicultural wise man. Juggling pictures of different cultures visited by the young seafaring "Ron" (as the guide refers to him, because that's the kind of casual cult icon he was), it includes a memorable sequence in which a stone Buddha is repeatedly juxtaposed with a photo of a white-haired Hubbard appearing as sagelike as possible for someone who looks like the president of a repo-man association.

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Most of the exhibits at the Hubbard strain to create a picture of the Scientology founder as a larger-than-life action/adventure hero, a daredevil pilot and courageous sea captain and, above all, an author whose diarrhetic output suggests either an inspired demiurge or a one-man literary sweatshop.

At its best, the Hubbard offers a portrait of the dead cult icon as a writer. The '40s manual typewriter on which Hubbard gushed out the sacred text of Dianetics is presented as a holy relic. A recurring photograph shows the author clutching a quill pen at his desk, apparently ready to sign the Declaration of Independence. Elsewhere, a full-scale Depression-era newsstand, replete with a cigar-chomping vendor, features endless rows of period pulp magazines that published Hubbard's fiction; their lurid covers — featuring buxom space-suited blondes and robots ejaculating lethal beams from their eyeballs — provide one of the museum's artistic highlights. Disappointingly, the exhibition doesn't include a lovingly detailed re-creation

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THE L. RON  
HUBBARD  
LIFE EXHIBITION

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of El Ron's office — perhaps because three of them already exist at the nearby Scientology headquarters where tours are also offered.

Hubbard's greatest innovation was not a strictly literary one, however, but the fabrication of a low-grade lie detector called the E-meter, which is used in Scientology counseling sessions. A large vitrine contains about two dozen models, ranging from the earliest '50s black box to the latest high-tech design, which resembles a bathroom floor scale for pets. Nearby, the "See a Thought" exhibit affords the visitor a hands-on trial. After suggesting I relive a painful memory to prompt the E-meter's needle, the guide decided to help things along by pinching me. A few seconds later, the needle swung off the scale. "Now try to remember what the pinch felt like," she instructed. I didn't have to remember, I could still feel it. About 20 seconds went by and the needle abruptly jerked again — sure proof that the machine could measure my thoughts.

**T**HE FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTERISTIC OF KITSCH is that it tries to link its airbrushed pseudo-mythology to a classical version of the real thing. The E-meter qualifies by being packaged as a "religious artifact," though it also represents an example of kitsch technology and marketing. In all of these modes, it plays to a cultural fear of the unconscious as something uncontrollable, hence evil, which the E-meter tames through a system of "rational" measurements. It's an appealing fantasy because it obviates the hard work required for genuine insight — and as any advertising executive will tell you, emotional short cuts, no matter how laughably false, are always seductive. That is part of the lure of kitsch — it avoids any suggestion of conflict or difficulty. By promising to synthesize the once-irreconcilable truths of science, religion and psychoanalysis, Hubbard's device stacks up pretty well against rosary beads.

Ultimately, though, the device seems more like an offshoot of Hubbard's science fiction — especially when the exhibit's text describes it as "a thousand times more sensitive than existing Earth technology." More straightforward sci-fi achievements are chronicled in a number of other displays, among them a pair of space-epic dioramas that bring the Life Exhibition Hall to its camp climax. In one, a giant gas-masked alien towers over what could easily be mistaken

for a Hollywood Boulevard street character — a bearded longhair dressed in leopard skin and a fur cape. When the guide flicks her remote control, they exchange some painful dialogue and the longhair's chest starts heaving as if he's been sexually aroused. Unfortunately, no one rushes over with an E-meter.

In a gallery strangely done up as a plastic flower garden, oil paintings of key moments in Hubbard's life hang under miniature awnings. They look strangely out of place in such a high-tech funhouse, yet their antiquarian aura — enhanced by the timeless quality endemic to bad painting — lends itself to the task of mythicizing. Young Hubbard is shown hobnobbing with Mongolian bandits and Tibetan monks and cur-

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ing fellow patients at a naval hospital — scenes that may or may not have occurred — but rather than the subject, what is compelling is the contrast between the idealized daydreamlike image and the inadvertently awkward and imperfect rendering. As in the religious art of Mormon temples, the impression conveyed is not of humanity aspiring for the heavens so much as everyday banality gussied up in celestial drag.

To create a mythic figure, the logic runs, one must first destroy the factual subject. Like the White House or any similar kitsch institution, the Hubbard, with its fantasy-park ethos, subsumes all earthly traces of its symbolic occupant. El Ron himself is curiously absent from the film and video clips; in audio presentations, except for the last display, his speeches are read by others. More remarkably, there is no mention of his fam-

**MOST OF THE EXHIBITS AT THE HUBBARD STRAIN TO CREATE A PICTURE OF THE SCIENTOLOGY FOUNDER AS A LARGER-THAN-LIFE ACTION/ADVENTURE HERO, A DAREDEVIL PILOT AND COURAGEOUS SEA CAPTAIN AND, ABOVE ALL, AN AUTHOR WHOSE DIARRHETIC OUTPUT SUGGESTS EITHER AN INSPIRED DEMIURGE OR A ONE-MAN LITERARY SWEATSHOP.**

ily life, or the fact that he was married. (Predictably, there's no mention that his wife was imprisoned in the early '80s for obstructing private and government agencies investigating the church he founded.) Heavily downplayed is L. Ron's 1986 "departure from his body" — the absence of any memorial exhibit is a conspicuous one.

As the guide ushers me out under a garlanded archway announcing "The Way to Happiness," unanswered questions continue to nag. As in the Nixon library, the barrage of biographical trivia at the Hubbard doesn't instill a sense of intimacy but of distance.

The exhibition left me feeling no closer to understanding Hubbard as an individual; the displays had simply deified him, with a violence alienating to a non-believer. I hadn't even learned what the "L." in L. Ron stands for.

Though it's tempting simply to dismiss the Hubbard as the shrine of a crackpot pseudo-religion, we shouldn't. At a formal level, after all, its vocabulary derives from the heart of American media — the TV commercial, the educational museum and the sales expo. And in its counterfeit commingling of faith and art, the Hubbard reminds us that the words "cult" and "culture" come from the same root, which means "worship." Like the wall of celebrity faces that stare out from every newsstand, the Hubbard is a testament to the fact that we have yet to build a culture that is distinguishable from a cult. The result is that, as in this peculiar mausoleum, the remote control remains in the hands of salespeople. **L**

**THE E-METER QUALIFIES AS KITSCH BY BEING PACKAGED AS A "RELIGIOUS ARTIFACT." BY PROMISING TO SYNTHESIZE THE ONCE-IRRECONCILABLE TRUTHS OF SCIENCE, RELIGION AND PSYCHOANALYSIS, HUBBARD'S DEVICE STACKS UP PRETTY WELL AGAINST ROSARY BEADS.**