In 2011, as she listened to an 1880s recording of Alexander Graham Bell reciting "Mary Had a Little Lamb," Carlene Stephens, a curator at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., exclaimed, “This stuff makes the hair stand up on the back on my neck. It's the past speaking directly to us in a way we haven't heard before.”

The Smithsonian Institution has a whole lot of "this stuff." And much of it does, indeed, allow the past to speak directly to us. In this beautifully illustrated book, Richard Kurin, undersecretary for art, history and culture at the Smithsonian, uses 101 objects from the institution's vast collections to illuminate four thematic strands that recur throughout American history: America the beautiful and bountiful; life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; discovery, innovation and creativity, and diversity in our nation of nations. And Kurin provides an engaging way to enhance our knowledge of — and emotional connection to — our nation's past.

Kurin does not stray far from conventional wisdom. Many of his objects (such as "A Portrait, Said to Christopher Columbus," a shawl given by Queen Victoria to Harriet Tubman at the end of her life, and the furniture at Appomattox courthouse on the day Robert E. Lee surrendered) are little more than artifacts associated with an individual or an event that provide an occasion for a narrative about it.

A few objects, however, allow readers to sense what "it was like" for preceding generations of Americans. A pair of shackles, found on a compound off the coast of Dakar, in West Africa, Kurin reveals, were so small that the slave trapped in it walked around with the flesh of his or her legs raw and bloody because the metal rubbed against them. Passengers in Conestoga Wagons, Kurin points out, rarely rode inside them. They walked alongside the wagons, often traveling 10 or 15 miles a day. And the short-handled hoe, he indicates, enabled farm laborers to work efficiently, but forced them to bend — and suffer chronic back pain and spasms.

Several objects evoke emotional responses. To see the flag that flew over Fort McHenry when Francis Scott Key wrote "The Star Spangled Banner," visitors to the Smithsonian walk down a darkened hallway, pass charred remains of James Madison's...
presidential mansion, burned during the War of 1812, and a rocket and bomb from the British attack. Then they turn a corner, feel the light simulating dawn, and get their first glimpse of the now threadbare flag. Every time Kurin sees it he gets chills. Kurin’s response is quite typical, no doubt, even, I suspect, among some people for whom America has been less than beautiful or bountiful.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.
Objects from the Smithsonian Collections that represent the history of the United States include (clockwise, from left): Neil Armstrong's Apollo spacesuit, President Lincoln's stovepipe hat, an American Indian copper piece from Georgia, Louis Armstrong's trumpet, a baseball signed by Babe Ruth and the Hope Diamond.

Smithsonian Institution,
Baseball, autographed by Babe Ruth. 1993.0460.01.

Feed Loader,

Smithsonian Collections. Hope Diamond

Feed Loader,

Copper Repousse, winged dancer, Rogan Plate, Etowah site, Bartow County, Georgia, A091117
THE SMITHSONIAN'S HISTORY OF AMERICA IN 101 OBJECTS

By: Richard Kurin.
Publisher: The Penguin Press, 762 pages, $50.

Review: This beautifully illustrated book testifies to the rich and varied holdings of the institution and to the capacity of material objects to help enhance our knowledge of — and connection to — our nation's past.