



A History of New York in 101 Objects

Sam Roberts

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The vibrant story of America's great metropolis, told through 101 distinctive objects that span the history of New York, all reproduced in luscious, full color.

A wooden water barrel and an elevator brake. A Checker taxicab and a conductor's baton. An oyster and a mastodon tusk. Inspired by *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, *The New York Times*' Sam Roberts chose fifty objects that embody the narrative of New York for a feature article in the paper. Many more suggestions came from readers, and so Roberts has expanded the list to 101. Here are just a few of what this keepsake volume offers:

- The Flushing Remonstrance, a 1657 petition for religious freedom that was a precursor to the First Amendment to the Constitution.
- Beads from the African Burial Ground, 1700s. Slavery was legal in New York until 1827, although many free blacks lived in the city. The African Burial Ground closed in 1792 and was only recently rediscovered.
- The bagel, early 1900s. The quintessential and undisputed New York food (excepting perhaps the pizza).
- The Automat vending machine, 1912. Put a nickel in the slot and get a cup of coffee or a piece of pie. It was the early twentieth century version of fast food.
- The "I Love NY" logo designed by Milton Glaser in 1977 for a campaign to increase tourism. Along with Saul Steinberg's famous *New Yorker* cover depicting a New Yorker's view of the world, it was perhaps the most famous and most frequently reproduced graphic symbol of the time.

Unique, sometimes whimsical, always important, *A History of New York in 101 Objects* is a beautiful chronicle of the remarkable history of the Big Apple that will enrich your mind and rekindle memories.

A History of New York in 101 Objects Details

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Kasa Cotugno says

Full disclosure - I love New York but have become somewhat jaded on recent visits. The crumbling infrastructure requiring 24/7 construction blocks movement both vehicular and pedestrian (I know this is not only NY but everywhere, but seems more concentrated there), and the human congestion is worse than ever. But I love reading about that city, from across the country, safely. Patterned after Neil MacGregor's A History of the World in 100 Objects, Roberts uses his choices as jumping off points for essays on the City and its development. For instance, a chapter titled "To City Signs" about directions in the subway leads to a discourse on the Manhattan-centric attitude prevalent among "Outer Boroughs," despite disparity in populations. Granted, Mr. Roberts admits his list is subjective, and he gives almost as much attention to the black and white cookie as to a jar of dust from the fallen Towers. Some entries are both hilarious and informative (i.e., Pooper Scooper). Although I read it through, this book can be experienced in nips, and I intend to return to enjoy the City. From afar.

Dan Lalande says

A piecemeal introduction to the history of NYC, based on the popular anthropological conceit that a sample size of cultural souvenirs can constitute an evolutionary timeline. Carefully selected and sufficiently revelatory as the souvenirs are, let the quibbles begin! Where's the high-heeled shoe of a leggy Rockette? A first edition of The Great Gatsby? A petrified motzah ball from the improbably shut down Carnegie Deli?

Cory says

I received a free copy of this First Reads selection.

I enjoyed BBC's "A History of the World in 100 Objects" podcast and enjoyed the format, but was curious to see if this book would really be a "history" (i.e., a cohesive story with a thread that ran through the entire book), or rather a disjointed series of vignettes. Although, like the BBC series it fails to tell a single story, it is nonetheless an interesting look at various artifacts and their historical context. It never really goes deep, but it does give just a taste of the stories behind objects that make up NYC's culture. (I never would have sought out the story behind New York's rooftop water towers, but I enjoyed reading two pages about them.)

I've never been to New York, and I probably know about as much as the average American about its history. For someone who lives there this book might be more meaningful, but those wanting a deep history might be left disappointed.

Claire says

I received A History of New York in 101 Objects as part of a Goodreads giveaway.

Sam Roberts explores 101 pieces of material culture that embody New York in all its rich cultural glory. From an ancient mastodon tusk found in Queens to the contract that "sold" Manhattan to the Dutch (Native Americans might have something to say about how voluntary this was) to a jar of dust from 9/11. Each entry is brief, 2-3 pages, and usually accompanied by a photograph or two.

I have my master's degree in Museum Studies and currently work in a museum, so I love public history, artifacts, and basically everything this book is about. Unsurprisingly, it was a big hit. The brief chapters are perfect for quick reads, the pictures fascinating (I only wish there were more), and the curation of selected objects is great. A perfect gift for a history buff or lover of NYC.

h says

I received this book for free via Goodreads First Reads, and I took the time to savor it once it arrived. This is a gorgeous book, which traces the history of New York using objects/items of significance to the city and its origins. As a non-New-Yorker, I suspect that the book would make stronger connections with folks who recognize some of the objects because of their own experience in the city. But even as an outsider, it was delightful to be introduced to such a concrete and visceral timeline of one of the world's most famous and history-rich cities. The book is beautifully presented, with short bursts of text about each object, no more than a page or two at most. If you're looking for in-depth history, this won't be the book for you. Instead, it's history through touchstones, the key points of a city's long life. Recommended for anyone who loves history packaged in an artistic and representative way.

Andrew says

I listened to, and enjoyed, the BBC's "A History of the World in 100 Objects" series as a podcast, so when I saw this book, I was intrigued to see what objects would be chosen to tell the history of New York City. I should probably also disclose that I grew up in the far distant reaches of "upstate" Western New York, and as such have a natural bias against New York City. However, I do recognize the importance of the City in the history of the United States (and the world, for that matter).

To begin with, the task this book attempts to take on is formidable. New York has a long and complicated history, and trying to do it justice using just 101 objects is, perhaps, an impossible task. That said, this book does a pretty good job at showing how the city grew, changed, evolved, and became the place it is today. Reaching back into prehistory, the book begins with geology, and then quickly moves through the colonial period, helping to show the influence of the original Dutch settlers and the transition to British rule. We are shown how the city became a major port and industrial center, home to finance and banking, theater, fashion, and much more. The stories of the object here are also the stories of New York's colorful cast of characters: politicians, businessmen, artists, and more. We glimpse the city's triumphs as well its greatest tragedies.

By the author's own admission, there is much that was omitted (by necessity). But for someone who wants a general overview of the history of one of America's greatest cities, wonderfully illustrated and easy-to-read, then this book is quite possibly the book they should read.

Skyler says

300 years of nyc history crammed into 300 pages, left me wanting to know more. The 101 object gimmick was pretty hokey and unnecessary, but I learned a lot and interested in learning more

Abigail Holland says

Loved this creative rendering of New York City history -- these tidbits really bring to life so many wonderful details of our past. Definitely recommend to any New Yorker interested in learning more about our city.

Radym says

For former New Yorkers like myself that desperately clutch to the memories of this magical city, "A History of New York in 101 Objects" is not only a portal back home, but a lesson in history of the city that I never received. Based on a smaller version of this list in piece that Roberts wrote for the New York Times, "101 Objects" moves seamlessly from the Fordham Gneiss of 1.2 billion years ago to Hurricane Sandy.

Each short chapter takes on an object that has been an integral part in the formation of the history and culture(s) of New York City. A couple of my favorite are: the black and white cookie -- one of my father's favorites; and the subway token, which was long ago replaced by Metro cards. Because the objects are richly described in a matter of 2-3 pages, it's an easy book to pick up and put down, but also a great coffee table addition and gift.

I would love to see this concept expanded to other cities, but for now, I am so happy that I can bring myself back to the city whenever I want just by opening this book.

Tom Donaghey says

A HISTORY OF NEW YORK IN 101 OBJECTS is the delightful kind of book that is handy to have if you need to fill in the spare moments of your life. This is a history of New York City as told through the writing of a guy who loves her. He uses items which to the outsider might feel like a random collection of things but which to Sam Roberts provide an incisive look into what made the Big Apple the great city it is.

Be it oysters, burial beads, the Otis Safety Brake (thereby allowing high-rise buildings to reach for the sky), the quintessential stoop or baseball (you might have heard there have been a team or three in the area), Mr. Roberts writes 2 or 3 page homilies (with a photo) upon why these things have allowed N.Y., N.Y. to become what it is.

You might not agree with his choices but you can argue about that while talking around the water cooler at work. He makes good arguments why these items are standouts. If your opinion differs, make your own list. While this book should resonate more with natives of that fair city, any one can enjoy it.

I won this book through Goodreads.

Beth Ann says

Interesting but lacking. I did learn some new tidbits.

Dawn says

I have always been interested in local history, but not necessarily told in long narratives. This book tells the story of New York along with beautiful full color photographs of the objects telling the story (with the exception of one object no one knows the location of !) I learned so much, looked up more info plenty of times, and made a list of places I want to visit after getting reading them.

In the epilogue, there is notes on how some objects were voted on but not included, and you are invited to suggest your own. It seems likely that there will be a volume 2. I look forward to reading that if it does come to fruition.

This book can be read all at once, skipped around, or an object a day. No matter how, a thoroughly entertaining read, for New York lovers everywhere.

I received a free copy of this book through Goodreads First Reads.

Dayna says

Disclaimer: I received this book as a Goodreads giveaway.

This is an interesting book full of bite-sized chunks of history. It makes a great coffee table book - large and hard-bound with colorful photos, each chapter can be ready in a few minutes.

I learned a lot of random tidbits throughout the book and generally found it pretty interesting. It also makes for a great "on the side" book - something to read whenever you don't have the time/attention span to read an entire chapter of your current book (I'm one of those people who CANNOT stop mid-chapter). It's a nice light read (in brain power required - the book is not short).

I wasn't a fan of the jokes thrown in here and there... they came off as awkward and ill-placed. I also found that it was assumed that the reader would know more New York history than is really common knowledge, though it wasn't very often.

Overall, I enjoyed it. I think it would make a good gift as well.

Nancy says

When I was a girl growing up along the Niagara River, I was fascinated by the depiction of New York City I saw in old movies. New York was exciting, vital--the hub of the world. In 1964 or 65 my friend went to the World Fair and I envied her. I did not get to New York City until my husband took a position in Philadelphia; later he worked in New York on Riverside Drive!

Our first visits we took the train, bringing a bag lunch to eat in Central Park. We went to the Empire State Building and saw the Statue of Liberty. We ate in China Town. We saw Yentl off Broadway, The Fantasticks, and the New York City Opera. I'll never forget The Pearl Fishers! We walked through the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, and I visited the Guggenheim. I shopped at Macy's, thinking of Miracle on 34th Street.

Reading Roberts' book is delightful. His mini history lessons revolve around an artifact that illuminates the city's history, but also the history of our nation.

He begins with the very rock layer that made possible the construction of Manhattan skyscrapers and ends with a Madonna statue that survived Hurricane Sandy and a fire, "a symbol of what we've been through, but also of our resurrection."

In between we read about inventions that altered life--the sewing machine, the Otis safety brake, Levittown homes. There is tragedy--the Triangle factory fire monument, which Francis Perkins called "the day the New Deal Begin," and a jar of dust from 9-11.

The arts are represented: A stamp commemorating the iconoclastic Armory Show, Leonard Bernstein's baton, the skeleton of the King Kong movie figure, the mask from The Phantom of the Opera. And of course New York's food history: An oyster, the bagel, jello, the black and white cookie, and the Horn and Hardart Automat.

Roberts' admits to being subjective in his choices. Each object had to be emblematic of historic transformation, and of enduring relevance. He writes, "history, after all, isn't really about the past. Our history is about who we are right now and where, as a society, we're headed."

I connected with many of these objects. I grew up at the end of the Erie Canal and Levittown type houses were built around me at my birth. When I saw parts of King Kong at a friend's house it terrified me. Oh, the bagels! We can't get anything like them in the Midwest. Other objects I have heard about, and some are new to me. I have been enjoying learning about them all.

I won Roberts' book on Goodreads.

Michael says

I received this book through a Good Reads "First Reads" Give-away. Essentially, the book is a number (101 to be exact) of 2 to 3 page essays that describe a certain object that evokes something quintessentially "New York", and then puts that object into its historical and cultural context. It is a lively, entertaining read - perfect to pick up when you only have five minutes here, three minutes there. (I read a lot of this book during the inevitable television commercials and "down" times during a couple of baseball playoff games.) I am in all likelihood stating the obvious but I suspect readers will find this book much more riveting if they (or their parents/grandparents/etc.) are from New York City - otherwise reading 101 two or three pagers on topics such as the Cross Bronx Expressway or the little button the Metropolitan Museum of Art used to give its visitors may make one's eyes start to glaze over. But if you live/lived in or are fascinated by the Big Apple, a fun, enjoyable read.
