

THE CHIC AMERICAN

A New York exhibition opens the door to Nan Kempner's lavish wardrobe and offers a glimpse of the high life on Park Avenue, writes *Sharon Krum*.

When friends needed to describe the late Nan Kempner, New York socialite and legendary clothes horse, they often found it easiest just to quote her: "I wouldn't miss the opening of a door." "I'm a drunk when it comes to clothes." "I want to be buried naked, because there must be a store where I'm going."

The famously thin society hostess didn't miss a haute couture season in more than 40 years. She was a permanent fixture on the International Best Dressed List, and her collection of clothes at the time of her death included a staggering 362 jumpers, 354 tailored jackets, 106 bikinis, 300 haute couture outfits and 169 pairs of shoes. Says Harold Koda, curator of Nan Kempner: *American Chic*, an exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art: "Nan's wasn't a closet, it was an archive."

"There are very few people who will dedicate themselves to fashion the way Nan did," he adds. "She was simply the perfect storm of a certain kind of American socialite. She had a husband who had deep pockets, the body proportions of a fashion drawing and the intelligence and the creative eye to make it all work."

Born into a wealthy San Francisco family in 1930 and married to banking heir Thomas Kempner in 1952, her wardrobe is a window into the life of that select breed – the New York social swan. It tells the story of a woman who lived on Park Avenue, entertained lavishly, shopped in Paris, holidayed in the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas, lunched at Le Cirque, danced at Studio 54 and flew an orchestra in from Europe to perform at her 50th wedding anniversary ball.

Says David Patrick Columbia, editor of the website *newyorksocialdiary.com*, which chronicles the doings of Manhattan's social elite: "People always loved reading about Nan because she had a dream life."

Kempner was a product of her upbringing. The story goes that her father told her early in life: "You'll



never make it on your face, so you'd better be interesting" and she took this to heart. "She was curious about everything and everyone," says Koda.

Columbia describes her as "truly Californian – independent and pioneer-spirited", adding: "For someone who lived in a rarefied world, she was very down to Earth. Nan was very frank and open about herself. For example, when her husband had an affair [they separated, then reconciled], she didn't tiptoe around it. She said, 'I don't like it, but that's the way it is.'"

Kempner, who was said to be the inspiration for Tom Wolfe's use of the term "social X-rays" in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (a reference to Manhattan's tribe of stick-thin ladies-who-lunch), bought her first couture dress – a white Dior sheath – at the age of 19. Right until her death in 2005 from emphysema, she could be seen in the front row at couture shows in Paris – and at 175cm and 47.6kg she could fit the catwalk samples, which halved the standard \$12,000-\$100,000 price tags.

Yves Saint Laurent's clothes were her first love. His often androgynous designs perfectly suited her long, lean silhouette; and the admiration was reciprocated – she was the designer's American muse. But she played the field. The garments on display at the Metropolitan come from Valentino, Oscar de la Renta, John Galliano for Christian Dior, Gaultier, Fendi, Lanvin, Emanuel Ungaro and, of course, YSL.

"It started in childhood," she told me in an interview two years before she died. "I had a grandmother who was a sensational-looking dame, and my mother loved clothes. And maybe I'm insecure and feel I need to wrap myself in beautiful things to present a good face. We all dress for people to look at us and disguise our imperfections, don't we?"

When asked how much she spent each year on couture, she laughed. "I don't know, and if I did I wouldn't tell you." She was emphatic that, despite reports to the contrary, couture was not dying. "Creativity is never dead," she said. "And couture is the pot in which everything else is stirred."

Kempner recounted the time she took off her YSL skirt to show students during a lecture at New York University. "I stood there in my petticoat and passed around the clothes. I wanted them to see the lining, the stitching, the details." (She once took off her YSL pants outside a restaurant, too, and strode in wearing only her jacket after learning that pants for women were forbidden.)

To feed her fashion habit, in the late '60s and '70s

Kempner contributed to US *Harper's Bazaar* and French *Vogue*, and later in life she worked as an international representative for the auction house Christie's, but her real métier was dressing herself. Fashion editor Diana Vreeland once remarked that there was no such thing as a chic American woman, with the exception of Nan Kempner.

Says Harold Koda: "Her appetite for clothes was superhuman, but I think there was something deeper going on. Nan was also a frustrated artist, and I think all that visual acuity became sublimated in creating her own wardrobe. She was really like a performance artist with fashion."

But given that her wardrobe was predominantly French, why call the show "American Chic"?

"Couture on the runway is very theatrical and precise," explains Koda. "Nan always pared it down or mixed and matched. She projected a very carefree, sportswear attitude in the way she dressed, and that is very American."

David Patrick Columbia says Kempner's wardrobe wasn't the only key to her success among Park Avenue society. "She was an excellent hostess. Nan learnt from the previous generation to entertain well, and that was a major ticket in New York society."

Kempner, a lifelong smoker, swore she loved food, which was hard to believe when you saw her up close. Pin-thin – due, she insisted, to disciplined eating and exercise – she once landed herself in trouble by declaring that she "loathed fat people". Yet she claimed to read cookbooks compulsively, even wrote one, and spent hours planning her famous four-course dinner parties (prepared by her cook), attended by luminaries including Princess Diana.

"There's no question I'm a dinosaur," she said of her entertaining. "Society today just doesn't have that kind of time. I happen to love people, so my idea of heaven is having them for breakfast, lunch and dinner."

Kempner also loved going out, and joked that her husband often asked if they could just stay home for one night. But there was also a serious side to her, as evidenced by her tireless fundraising.

"I think you owe it to yourself to do the best at everything," she said, when asked to sum up her philosophy of life. "Whether it's charity or entertaining or dressing or making your house comfortable. Frankly I wouldn't go downstairs and mail a letter if I didn't think I looked right." ©

Nan Kempner: American Chic is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art until March 4. Sharon Krum is a New York-based freelancer. Her previous article for this magazine was "Never out of fashion" (April 23-24, 2005), about US *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour.

"We all dress for people to look at us and disguise our imperfections, don't we?" said Kempner, wearing a YSL jacket in 2005. Opposite, some of her 169 pairs of shoes in the exhibition.

