

Art legend Gregory Kondos happily paints the blues

Gregory Kondos, from his wheelchair, sweeps a paintbrush in quick, deft strokes across a canvas. His hand is as steady as a boy's.

He sits back for a moment and surveys his work, a painting of his beloved Sacramento River Delta. His eyes, unblinking, find the perfect place for another wisp of white, and another.

At 93, Kondos works nearly every day in his small downtown Sacramento studio, a street-level space perfumed with turpentine and oil paints. He is surrounded by a delightful mess of artwork, old family photographs, art and history books, and his many hats. His palette is a sheet of clear glass framed with duct tape and dotted with oil paint squirted from tubes.



Legendary painter Gregory Kondos at work in his downtown Sacramento studio. (Sacramento State/Jessica Vernone)

He paints the landscape of his favorite locales: Yosemite, the American Southwest, the Delta, France, and Greece, his parents' homeland. Every painting begins with a charcoal sketch made from memory or a treasured photograph. And when he paints, almost always there is a touch of blue – his signature color.

“I’m the boss of the blues,” he says with a chuckle.

Kondos is one of Northern California’s most renowned and beloved landscape painters. His work is still in demand by private collectors, and he continues to produce commissions and exhibit his artwork.

This fall, he’ll have paintings at the Sutter County Memorial Museum in Yuba City (celebrating the National Park Service’s 100th anniversary) and at the Caldwell Snyder Gallery in San Francisco. Locally, his work will be a part of group exhibitions at Sacramento State’s Robert Else Gallery, the Shimo Center for the Arts, and his namesake Kondos Gallery at Sacramento City College. And he has loaned his just-completed oil painting “Lady Liberty” to Sac State. It’s hanging in the University Library. [\(View photo of “Lady Liberty” exhibit.\)](#)

Among his permanent public art installations are the 510-foot-long glass mural “River’s Edge” and the 12-foot-tall oil painting “Sutter’s Gold,” both at Sacramento

International Airport. His oil-on-canvas “River Life” is on display at Sac State’s Leslie and Anita Harper Alumni Center.

He had a museum show in Shanghai when he was 87. The Crocker Art Museum honored him with a solo retrospective, “A Touch of Blue: Landscapes by Gregory Kondos,” to celebrate his 90th birthday in 2013.

Among his honors was a lifetime achievement award from the Florence Biennale in Italy and election to the prestigious National Academy in New York City.

Kondos is known throughout the world and is a legend locally, as well. He was one of the first homegrown celebrities to get a star on the Sacramento Walk of Stars and was inducted during an Aug. 31 gala at Memorial Auditorium.

And he received an honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts degree from Sac State and the California State University (CSU) Board of Trustees during the Spring 2016 Commencement. The honor came nearly six decades after Kondos earned his master’s degree – and 65 years since completing his bachelor’s-level studies – from then-Sacramento State College.

“I’m flattered,” he says. “What Sac State did for me was that it opened the door to those who made art: the faculty and other students. It was a good place to start.”

His doctoral hood has a place of honor in the townhouse he shares with his wife, Moni Van Camp Kondos. It’s draped across a bucket of walking sticks at the front door.

“You are one of the greatest painters of all time, a man I admire,” Sacramento State President Robert S. Nelsen told Kondos during a pre-Commencement reception at the Julia Morgan House. “There are special days, days that matter, and those days are very often when we honor someone who does things we never dreamed could be done.

“Gregory Kondos has touched our hearts through his art.”

Kondos grew up in Sacramento from about age 3, when his parents moved the family from Massachusetts, and he served four years in the Navy during World War II before returning to his hometown for good.

“My father greeted me at the bus station,” he recalls. “He said, ‘What are you going to do now?’ ‘I’m going to go to school,’ I said. He still couldn’t speak English. I said, ‘Dad, I want to be an artist.’ I knew he wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer or a pharmacist. He looked at me and said, ‘Go for it.’ Those words made me who I am today.”

Kondos was a student at Sacramento State College when the school was in its infancy and holding classes in rented quarters at Sacramento Junior (now City) College on Freeport Boulevard. By the time he completed his master’s degree in art in 1957, Sacramento State was a decade old and fully settled at its permanent site on J Street.

While at Sac State, Kondos studied art alongside the now world-renowned painter Wayne Thiebaud, and the two became lifelong friends. Both went on to teach at the junior college and, in 1960, Thiebaud became an assistant professor at UC Davis.

Thiebaud and Kondos were among the group of Sacramento artists who, in 1958, founded Sacramento’s first private art gallery, Artists Cooperative Gallery, which later became Artists Contemporary Gallery.

“We didn’t have a gallery to show our work, so we would get a window at Weinstock Lubin & Co, the department store, at the Starlite drive-in movie theater, or at the back of the bar. My first show was at a bar called Peter Pan,” Kondos says.

In 2010, the art gallery at Sacramento City College, where Kondos taught for 27 years, was named for him.

Kondos once had five art studios: on a mountainside in France; in Santa Fe, N.M.; and, in California, in Pacific Grove, south of Clarksburg in the Delta, and at his Sacramento townhouse, the last being only one remaining. He’s in there almost every day. The Delta piece is almost finished.

“A painter paints; an artist tries to do everything, even stringing beads,” he says. “I’m not an artist, I’m a painter.” – *Dixie Reid*

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