

# Gregory Kondos Sacramento Bee

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*City College unites three art world masters. Through them, program awaiting new gallery rose to prominence.*

by Dixie Reed

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See more photos of artists Wayne Thiebaud, Gregory Kondos and Fred Dalkey and their work: [sacbee.com/photos](http://sacbee.com/photos)



Three men considered among the finest painters to hail from Sacramento - from left, Gregory Kondos, Wayne Thiebaud and Fred Dalkey - gathered in town on a rare occasion to reminisce about their painting careers, their friendship and each man's role in the acclaimed Sacramento City College art program through the years.

As Sacramento City College prepared for this month's demolition of its 1930s fine arts building and art gallery, Chris Daubert opened a drawer to reveal a small oil painting.

It was Wayne Thiebaud's "Two Pie" - neat slices of pumpkin and chocolate cream served up on white plates from 1961, early in his dessert periods.

"It's our most valuable piece," the gallery director said. "We bought it then for \$100. That's what his paintings were going for before 1962, when he had that show in New York and became a legend."

How the work of such a famous artist came into the possession of a local junior college is part of a bigger story about Sacramento's diverse art scene and the characters who inhabit it.



From left, Gregory Kondos' "Morning" is a 1961 oil. Wayne Thiebaud sold his 1961 classic, "Two Pie," for \$100 to the Sacramento City College art department. Fred Dalkey portrays "34th and R Streets" in his 1990 oil.

Wayne Thiebaud. Gregory Kondos. Fred Dalkey. Sacramento's painterly triumvirate.

The work of these distinguished local artists is known far beyond this community. They've all had major exhibitions in New York and have been honored by the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1994, Thiebaud also received the National Medal of the Arts from President Bill Clinton.

But the three friends first crossed paths many years ago at City College, where they helped build its prestigious art collection.

Now, with the collection mothballed while a new arts building and gallery are constructed, they agreed to a rare interview together, meeting one afternoon for coffee to talk about painting, old times and friendship.

"We're supposed to say something important" I wasn't prepared for that," Thiebaud said jokingly.

He is, at age 88, one of America's most celebrated working painters. Thiebaud was a local talent until 1962, when Manhattan art dealer Allan Stone gave him a one-man show, and hungry collectors snapped up every one of his still lifes, not just of pie, but

candy, cake and lollipops, too. He later added landscapes and San Francisco streetscapes to his artistic menu.



Carl Costas ccostas@sacbee.com, to purchase photograph, visit [sacbee.com/photos](http://sacbee.com/photos). Fred Dalkey leads a drawing class last month at Sacramento City College. Dalkey was enrolled in the school's art program in the early 1960s, went on to earn a master's degree at California State University, Sacramento, then returned to City College where he's taught art for 40 years. Fred Dalkey leads a beginning drawing class on Feb. 25, 2009 at Sacramento City College. Dalkey is one of three prominent Sacramento artists who have taught at Sacramento City College and given their work to the school's Kondos Gallery -- which is now closed while the building is leveled and a new one constructed.

Two years ago at auction, Thiebaud's 1970 "Seven Suckers" brought a record price for California artist: \$4.52 million.

Kondos, 85, made his name in landscapes and is known for azure skies and a style that borrows from abstract expressionism. His works sells for upward of \$50,000.

Dalkey, the youngster at 65, had his first retrospective in 2002, at the Crocker Art Museum, where he once worked as a security guard. He, too, is a landscape painter, his work commanding \$15,000, and also is known for figure drawings.

The Central Valley's distinctive vistas have inspired the work of all three men.

"They are three of the most recognized artists to come out of Sacramento," said Crocker Jones. "One of the ways Sacramento is known to the world is through the work of these artists."

Dalkey picked the meeting place, the Coffee Garden near City College. He and Kondos arrive first and make their way to the back patio, steaming cups in hand, to await their buddy's arrival.

Kondos, always grinning, wears a gray pullover sweater with dark cords. He walks with a cane. The bearded Dalkey is dressed in his trademark turtleneck and suspenders.

Within minutes, along comes Thiebaud, the elder statesman - the "Messiah," Kondos calls him - in a pristine cream-colored cashmere sweater and linen slacks. His snappy attire prompts a Kondos anecdote:

"I have a picture of you, it's a great photograph. Here's this guy in white - white hat, white tennis shoes - and he's sitting here with one hand like this," Kondos says with a flourish. "The gentleman painter."

Kondos does most of the talking. He's gregarious, funny, and his friends seem happy to let him hold court. The patio is crowded this sunny afternoon, but no one seems to recognize these dons of Sacramento's art scene.



Carl Costas ccostas@sacbee.com, to purchase photograph, visit [sacbee.com/photos](http://sacbee.com/photos). At his Clarksburg studio, Gregory Kondos displays the 17-foot-long mural he's working on featuring a delta scene, San Joaquin River.

Thiebaud was the first of the three to land at what was then Sacramento Junior College, hired as an instructor in 1951. He chaired the art department throughout much of the 1950s and, in 1960, began his long association with the University of California, Davis.

Kondos, a city college alum, replaced Thiebaud as department chairman in 1962, and taught art classes for 26 years. Soon after his retirement, the campus' Little Gallery was renamed for him.

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

What began as a collegial relationship grew into something more.

"Wayne is my good friend, and he made it possible for me to be serious about what it is to teach," Kondos said. "I went to Greece once with three trunks of art supplies - sketch pads, oil paints, canvases - and did not open the trunks for 10 months. I watched shadows move and colors change and the movement of the wind in the ruins of Greece, and I came back a better man. Wayne has pushed me to discover what art is."

Dalkey was a student of Kondos' in the early 1960s and, after earning a masters degree at Sacramento State, he returned to City College where he's taught for 40 years.



Wayne Thiebaud, one of the nation's most celebrated painters, enjoys a light moment with Gregory Kondos and Fred Dalkey.

Over their coffee, the two older painters begin reminiscing about their early days at the junior college, when they were poor upstart artists with little more than a shared passion for the work. They would routinely stay after hours to brainstorm lessons and to paint.

"For many years," Thiebaud says, "we didn't have studios, so we painted in the oil (painting) room. The night watchman would come by and say, 'You aren't supposed to be in here.'"

"Well, remember?" Kondos says. "I think it was a three-day holiday, and we set up a still life, and we painted it that night and the next day, and then we ate up all the still life,"

"And," Thiebaud says, "we went home."



Chris Daubert, and art teacher at Sacramento City College, has stepped down as director of the school's Gregory Kondos Gallery.

Today, Sacramento City College's art program is known throughout the country, if not the world - in part because of Thiebaud, Kondos and Dalkey. Watercolorist Larry Weldon was another well-known teacher.

"There is a tradition of the instructors, this incredibly high caliber of work," said Daubert, the gallery director.

This year, 350 students are declared art majors, and the school currently offers 65 sections of art studio classes and 14 sections of art history.

Dalkey's classes are popular with the student artists and along with his teaching duties, he finds time for his own artwork. His wife, Victoria Dalkey, is The Bee's art critic.

Kondos spends mornings at his Clarksburg studio, completing the commission of a 17-foot-mural of a Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta scene. Thiebaud paints nearly every day.

"Too old to be a tennis pro," said Thiebaud, who at 88 continues to play the game regularly.



Carl Costas ccostas@sacbee.com, to purchase photograph, visit [sacbee.com/photos](http://sacbee.com/photos). Gregory Kondos at his Clarksburg studio. Kondos and fellow prominent Sacramento artists have taught at Sacramento City College and given their work to the school's Kondos Gallery, which is now closed for two years while being rebuilt.

It's not often that all three men are in town at the same time and have a chance to get together, even if it's at the behest of a newspaper reporter.

Kondos and Thiebaud have multiple residences: Kondos in Pacific Grove, Santa Fe, N.M., and on a mountainside in France, and Thiebaud in San Francisco and Laguna Beach.

Yet all of them consider Sacramento home.

"We are an old breed that stayed on instead of moved on," says Kondos, who came here with his Greek immigrant parents at age 3.

"I came here with the Army Air Force in 1942," says Thiebaud, who was raised in Southern California. "Sacramento is a great place. Good tennis weather."

Only Dalkey, born at Stutter Maternity Hospital, is not fully committed to his hometown.

"I'd rather have a studio in Manhattan myself," he says.



Carl Costas ccostas@sacbee.com, to purchase photograph, visit [sacbee.com/photos](http://sacbee.com/photos). Gregory Kondos strolls the grounds of Clarksburg's old sugar mill in January.

City College's new fine art building is expected to open in fall 2010. It will have five classrooms and a cozy space for the Gregory Kondos Gallery, along with a large room to house the school's art collection.

It also will have the archival air conditioning and humidity controls essential to maintaining artwork. In the old building, second-hand air conditioning was piped in from a nearby classroom.

"When the temperature went from 55 to 85 degrees in an hour and a half," Daubert said, "you could actually hear the paintings crack. They shrink, particularly Greg (Kondos') paintings, because the paint is so thick."



Anne Chadwick Williams, Sacramento Bee Staff Photo, to purchase photograph, visit [sacbee.com/photos](http://sacbee.com/photos). Artist Greg Kondos poses in front of glass panels he designed for the expanded Sacramento International Airport at Architectural Glass Design in Napa where they were fabricated on Sept. 23, 1997.

Back at the Coffee Garden, discussion turns to whether the gallery director is right, whether years of being stored without climate control in the old gallery has taken its toll on Kondos' paintings.

"It's not true," Kondos says. "I see my old work and it's like I did it yesterday. I don't see any cracking."

"Maybe Chris (Daubert) is a lot more sensitive than I give him credit for, anybody who can hear paint crack," Dalkey says, laughing.

"Old paintings crack anyway," Thiebaud says.

Kondos agrees.

"I know, especially with black," he says. "Is it true, or what?"

The City College collection, which dates to the 1920s, began as an art bank from which instructors could borrow examples for their classes. The first gallery space was a hallway displaying student work, and then the Little Gallery was opened in the library.

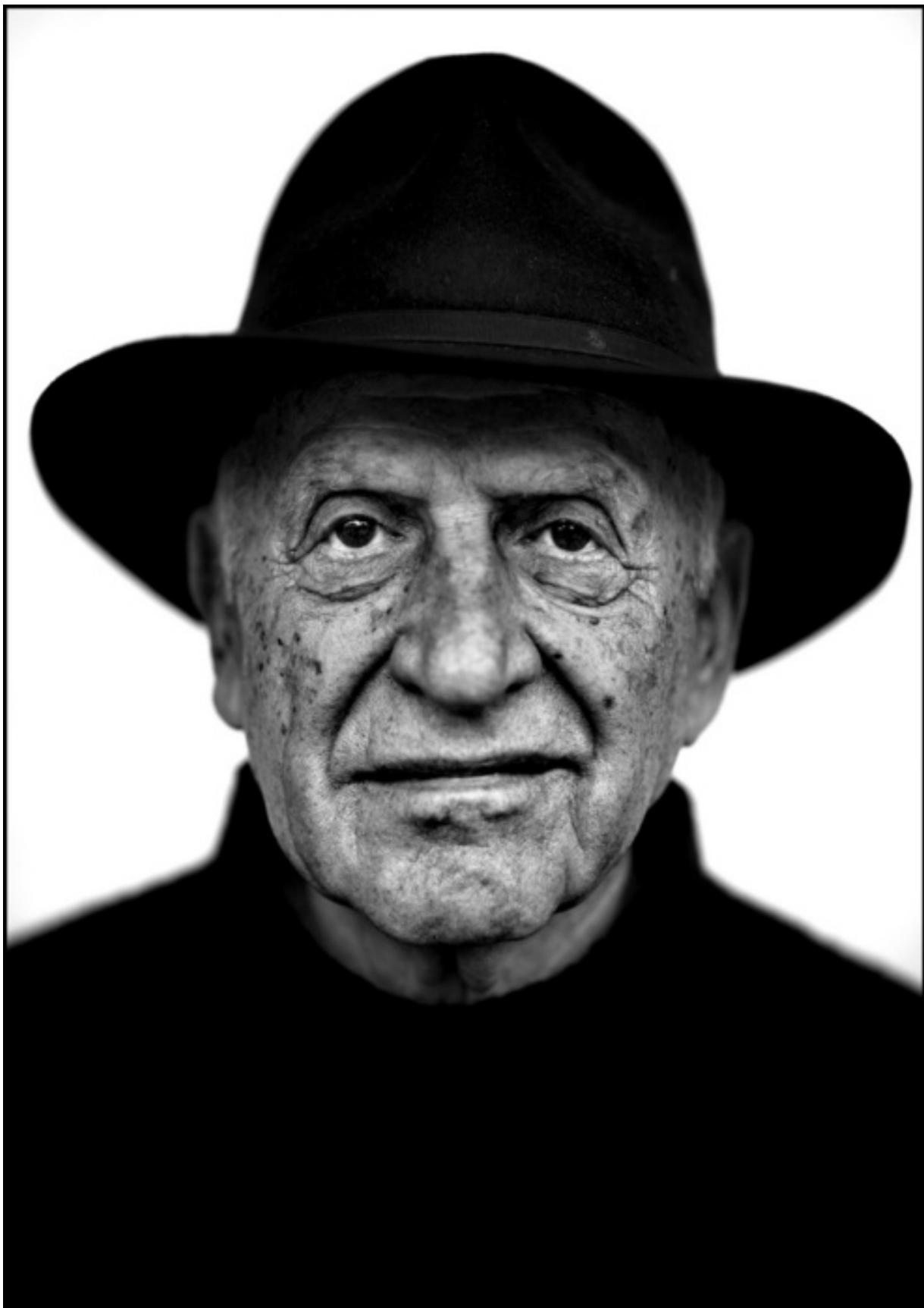
It was Kondos who convinced school administrators to give up a classroom for the gallery, then ran it until he retired. Art teacher Darrell Forney took over and advocated naming it for Kondos.

After Forney's retirement in 1997, art teacher Daubert stepped in. Recently he, too, left the post - but not before packing up the 1,200 paintings, sculptures, drawings and prints that make up the permanent collection.

"I think it's the best collection of local artwork anywhere in the area," Daubert said, "The history of this collection is very specifically Sacramento, and we have Sacramento art from way back.

"Some of it was extorted, especially when...we were collecting work from students," he continued. "The ones who were the strongest students ended up being the best artists, like Mel Ramos and Kurt Fishback and Robert Else."

Dalkey donates several pieces a year, Daubert said, and Thiebaud gave a collection of his prints from 1952 to 1999 saying, "I thought you should have a little collection showing my career," Kondos has been ridiculously generous," Daubert said, giving suites of original drawings from his sketchbook.



Kevin German, Sacramento Bee Staff Photo, to purchase photograph, visit [sacbee.com/photos](http://sacbee.com/photos). Greg Kondos, 84, is something of a local legend. A close friend of Wayne Thiebaud, he has been painting seemingly forever. He has houses in Santa Fe, Pacific Grove, the south of France. His hero is Cezanne. He has a great collection of hats.

Theibaud thinks back to the 1950s, when the school gave up the small gallery space in the library for a dedicated gallery.

"It was a little more formalized and we did all kinds of shows," he says. "There was a fellow who came here from New York in a traveling sleeping car full of prints."

"I've got a couple of those," Kondos says.

"He'd come around to the colleges and sell prints and drawings, and we bought quite a few, like Kandinsky, Goya, Diego Rivera, Rufino Tamayo," Thiebaud says. "That gave us the chance to have an exhibition of original prints. And we had a series of faculty shows, student shows from other junior colleges and local people, as well."

"It was quite an active thing when Greg (Kondos) took over the gallery, as I remember."

What Kondos remembers most about that time is saving the gallery from near-oblivion.

"The administration wanted to take (Little Gallery) away from us, and put bathrooms there," he says. "So I fought it. I said, 'Art books aren't enough; students need to see the actual artwork.'"

When it opens in 18 months or so, the new gallery will remain small and unassuming and, with Daubert's departure, the collection will be in someone else's care - yet another in its existence.

There are interested candidates, said Daubert, but so far no firm commitments.

"It's a crazy job," he said. "I'd get a stipend...\$1,000 a semester, which is not enough to even work for. So I donated that money back to the gallery."

With any luck, Daubert's successor will love important pieces like "Two Pie" as much as he does - and work to hold onto them.



Renee C. Byer, Sacramento Bee Staff Photo, to purchase photograph, visit [sacbee.com/photos](http://sacbee.com/photos). Artist Gregory Kondos, 80, said it took him three weeks to complete his lion named "River Lion." This is one of eight completed lions that are part of an exhibit in the city of Sacramento called "Lion Safari."

There is a question only Wayne Thiebaud can answer and, as the interview winds down, it's time to ask: "Why did you name the painting 'Two Pie' instead of 'Two Pies,' since there are two slices?"

Thiebaud looks puzzled.

"I can't remember," he says with a shrug.

They all get a chuckle out of it, as Kondos dives into the story of how he acquired the painting for City College.

"When Wayne left the college and went over to Davis," he says, "I said, 'Wayne, we don't have a work of yours for our collection.' And guess what" I gave him \$100 and he gave us the painting of pie."

"It was overpriced even then," Thiebaud says, smiling.

"So we finally ended up with a painting of his, and it almost killed me," Kondos says. "I was afraid someone would steal it. I went to Wayne and said I was thinking about selling it and using the money for scholarships. These are almost his words: 'I didn't give you that painting to make money from it. I gave it so students can learn from it..'"

Dalkey, a generation younger than the other two, has the closest ties to the painting because he alone teaches at City College. He is very protective of the piece.

"We still have it, and it's cared for," he says, "and we don't want to talk about it too much."