

Gregory Kondos discusses his storied career in art: World-renowned Sacramento artist continues to produce high-quality art

November 25, 2019

By **LANCE ARMSTRONG**

Editor's Note: This is part two of a two-part series on Sacramento artist Gregory Kondos.

East Sacramento native Gregory Kondos is among the city's most accomplished artists. And at 96 years old, he remains unceasingly passionate about his work as a painter.

"Art is all I think about," Kondos said last week during an interview with this publication.

Kondos, whose medium of choice is oil, described himself as somewhat of a realist painter.

"I'm a realist in a way, but I'm not quoted as a realist," he said. "So, we turn to the words, landscape artist. That's what I am, and a damn good one. Don't you forget it."

Kondos noted that scenic images in his paintings, such as trees, do not always appear as one sees them in person.



“See these trees, I changed the shape of them,” he said while observing one of his paintings of the Sacramento River.

As a painter, Kondos is also a world traveler. He has painted in such places as France, Germany, England, Greece, Egypt, China and Japan.

But Kondos stressed that California scenes are among his favorite things to paint.

“There’s so much beauty in this state alone,” he said. “I won’t let go. That’s mine. That’s California.

“I know my days are closing, but I’ve been fortunate enough to be connected with this beautiful area, and I’m part of it.”

Kondos mentioned that for him, as an artist, traveling comes with the territory.

“I’ve got to come as close as I can to my mentor, and to do that, it wouldn’t be the library,” he said. “I have to go to France (to paint a scene in France).”

As for his decision to focus on painting landscape scenes, Kondos believes that his time in the Navy during World War II led to his desire to create such art.

Kondos said that becoming a quality artist is a process, which takes many steps.

And for Kondos, he has progressed monumentally as an artist since his years as an art student.

His schooling in art dates back to the 1940s, and included studying at Los Angeles’ famed Art Center School – today’s Art Center College of Design, in Pasadena.

He earned an associate degree in art at Sacramento Junior College (today’s Sacramento City College) and a bachelor’s degree in art at Sacramento State College (now California State University, Sacramento).

Kondos earned the latter degree in 1951, the same year of his marriage to Rosie Thalas.

That year also marked the beginning of his nine consecutive years of working with the art show at the California State Fair.

From 1953 to 1956, Kondos served as chairman of the art department at Elk Grove High School. Kondos recalled declining a request from that school’s football coach.

“He wanted me to give A’s to his football players who needed to raise their grade point averages,” he said. “I wouldn’t do it.”

Although Kondos told the coach that the players would have to earn their grades, those players gained respect for him.

“I don’t put out that (expletive),” he said. “They have to earn the grade. I got threats from the players, but when I went to (Sacramento City) College to teach (art) right after that, they followed me (and enrolled in his classes).”

During his years of teaching at Elk Grove High, Kondos exhibited his art at the Crocker Art Museum for the first of many times, and began teaching art at Sacramento Junior College while the renowned Sacramento artist, Wayne Thiebaud, was on sabbatical leave.



An important year in Kondos’ progression in art was 1957. He then earned a master’s degree in art at Sacramento State College, and accepted a permanent teaching position at Sacramento Junior College.

Four years later, Kondos became a guest art instructor at the Davis Community Center of Arts in Davis, and he started serving as chairman of the art department at Sacramento City College, which would one day become home to the Gregory Kondos Gallery.

Kondos began the first of his many years as an exhibitor at Gump’s Gallery in San Francisco in 1962. During the same year, he exhibited his works at museums in Southern California.

A year later, he spent time as a guest art instructor at the University of California, Berkeley.

During the late 1960s, Kondos' works were part of a group exhibition at London's Piccadilly Gallery and an exhibition at the Allan Stone Gallery in New York.

Kondos spent time overseas, exhibiting his works at a show in Athens in 1975, and he traveled in France on a painting trip two years later.

While in France, Kondos created sketches in the studio of the famous French artist Paul Cézanne.

In the early 1980s, Kondos visited France again, and experienced the loss of his wife, who died of cancer.

Another highlight of that decade for Kondos was his return trip to France.



With his passion for painting California landscapes, Kondos has a tremendous love for scenes in Yosemite National Park, where he became an artist-in-residence in 1990. He retained that position

through 1993, and held the same position in 2007.

An example of the longevity of Kondos as an artist is evident in the fact that 20 years have passed since he received a lifetime achievement award in Florence, Italy.

A year later, Kondos purchased a home in Puylaurens, France.

Kondos received another lifetime achievement award in 2007, when he was presented with the Golden Bear Award from the California State Fair.

Among Kondos' notable commissions was his painting for the then-new Terminal B at the Sacramento International Airport in 2010. That artwork is titled "Sutter's Gold."

During the same year, he joined Wayne Thiebaud and Fred Dalkey in a group exhibition at Sacramento City College.

Asked to share his thoughts about Thiebaud, Kondos responded with words of grand admiration.

Although Kondos referred to himself as an artist who worked separately from Thiebaud, he credits Thiebaud for helping him get noticed in the art world.

"(Without Thiebaud), it would be down to the minimal, 'Oh, you paint,' period, instead of recognition," he said. "But the whole thing is Sacramento had no power (in art) without (Thiebaud), as far as I'm concerned.

"Wayne is (number) one in Sacramento. I could be number two, but the establishment of who is the (number one) painter, it's Wayne. And I will stand up with that, and I swear to God that I'm right."

Kondos, who lives in Sacramento with his wife, Moni Van Camp, added that Sacramento is home to a significant number of other artists who have "made art move."



“We’re all over the place, and proud of it,” he said.

Among the countries in which Kondos has received praise for his paintings is China.

After traveling to China in 2010, with the Chinese-born Sacramento artist Shimo, Kondos returned to China two years later.

During that trip, Kondos became the only non-Chinese artist to have his art accepted into the permanent collection of the then-new museum in Shanghai.

While sitting in a room of his house filled with framed artwork, Kondos was asked what scenery he enjoys painting the most.

“The water,” he replied. “I can make you feel the difference, I think, between sea water and fresh water. I’m quite successful with it.

Kondos’ ability to produce high-quality paintings at a fast pace is another one of his specialties that he developed during his long career.

“I can do one a day,” he said. “I’m capable, so I’m damn good.”

Despite his confidence as an artist, Kondos said that he still enjoys receiving sincere compliments from others.

But he said that it was a child's compliment that attracted his greatest attention.

"You know what impressed me all these years?" he asked. "A little boy. I was signing my signature at a show I was having, and a little kid came by. It was 5 o'clock and everybody was going home.

"He comes out, and his mother was still inside. He looks at me and he leans on the table, and he said, 'You are amazing.' A little kid. I'll never forget that."