

# KONDOS

rolific and energetic at 87, one of Sacramento's favorite artists embarks on a major airport project

DIXIE REID  
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**T**he life and times of Gregory Kondos could be titled "The Old Man and the River."

It was on narrow levee roads along the Sacramento River where his father first let him drive. Years later, as a young painter, he spent hours in a green rowboat, studying trees along the banks, reflections in rippling water, the great expanse of blue sky and the golden sunlight - until the boat vanished one stormy night.

Today, Delta paintings are among the celebrated artist's best-known pieces. And it's here, in a riverside studio below Clarksburg, that Kondos is at work on a 12-foot-tall painting commissioned for the terminal under construction at Sacramento International Airport.

"I can see it finished," he says of the painting. "I think it's going to be powerful."

The work in oil will depict the region's other great river, the American, near the Colusa sawmill where gold was discovered in 1848. It will show the river flowing amid gray rocks and green hills, with distant mountains as a backdrop.

"They asked me to do the Sacramento River, the haystacks, the Delta - the things I'm

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ANDY ALFARO aalfaro@sacbee.com

**Gregory Kondos** sketches on the 12-foot canvas commissioned for the new terminal at Sacramento International Airport. Above, he descends the scaffold that lets him work on the top of the painting.

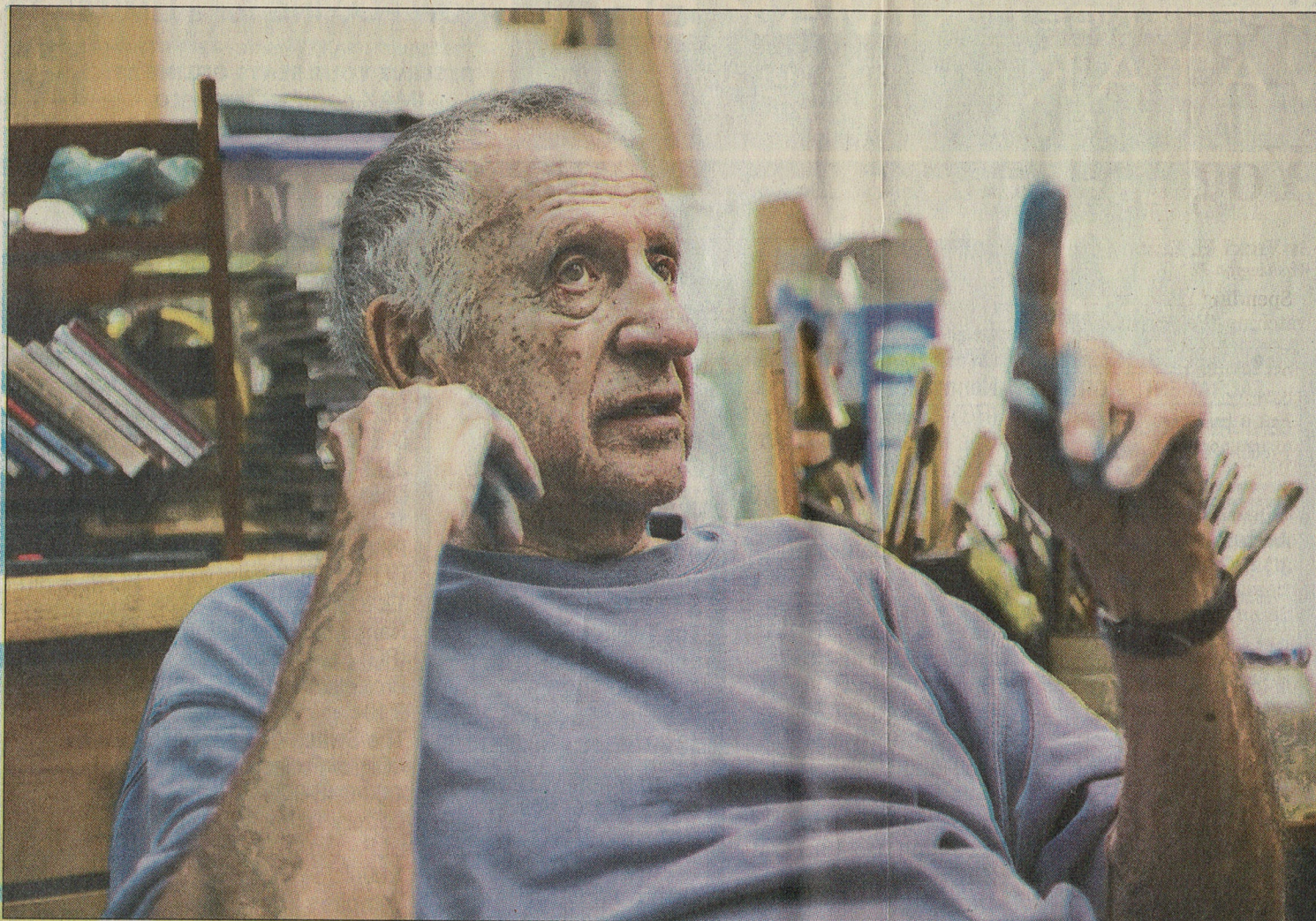
## WORKS BY FRED DALKEY, GREGORY KONDOS AND WAYNE THIEBAUD

**WHEN:** Noon-4 p.m. Monday-Friday and by appointment, through Sept. 24. The opening reception is 5-8 p.m. Thursday.

**WHERE:** Gregory Kondos Gallery, Fischbacher Art Building, Sacramento City College, 3835 Freeport Blvd., Sacramento

**COST:** Free

**INFORMATION:** (916) 650-2942 or e-mail [stevens@scc.losrios.edu](mailto:stevens@scc.losrios.edu)



Gregory Kondos gestures with a paint-stained finger in his Clarksburg studio, where he is working on a commission for the Sacramento International Airport.

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### On Gregory Kondos and his art ...

"He wants to be called a landscape painter, which is certainly first and foremost what he is, but I also look at him in conjunction with some of the earlier Californians, and I think he fits there. The simplicity of his paintings and the whiteness of his paintings, that's very much of his era, and I think it's also of this place."

— Scott Shields, Crocker Art Museum chief curator

The "Sutter's Gold" project for the Sacramento airport is "a challenging job, and he's 87, so it's pretty incredible that he's still working so diligently and took this project on. We like the idea of a nod to the Gold Rush era, which is so important to Sacramento's history."

— Shelly Willis, head of the Sacramento Metropolitan Art Commission's Art in Public Places program

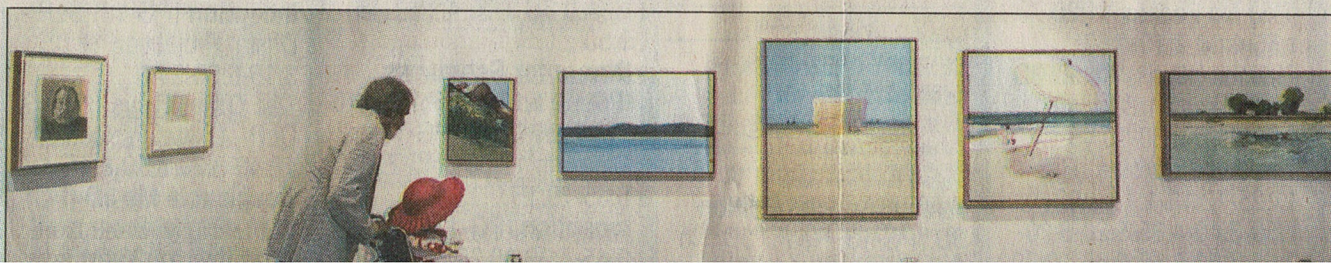
# Kondos: He paints daily in one of 5 studios

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known for — but I wanted to put together a painting of what made Sacramento," Kondos says, "and that was the Gold Rush."

The working title is "Sutter's Gold."

Shelly Willis, who manages the public art program



"The first time I became

Shelly Willis, who manages the public art program for the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission, called Kondos' focus on the Gold Rush intriguing. "I don't think people necessarily think about Sacramento in that way," she said. "There is more typical imagery we connect with Sacramento, and I like that this will introduce a new way of thinking about where we live."

Before Kondos took delivery of a scaffold at his studio to work on "Sutter's Gold," he climbed up and down an 8-foot ladder to apply charcoal line drawings, then oil paint, to the looming canvas. Even so, he tied a paintbrush handle to a stick so he could fill in the top 4 inches of sky.

Never mind that the man is 87, is in constant pain from a back injury 60 years ago, supports himself with a walking stick when he's on his feet and, let's face it, has no business going up and down a ladder. The other day, he fell while helping a deliveryman unload the scaffold. "It got away from us and sent me rolling," he says. "But I heal quickly."

Scott Shields, the Crocker Art Museum's chief curator, isn't surprised that Kondos is working hard at 87: "I think it has a lot to do with his personality. He's very driven, and he loves what he's doing. It's not a job he wants to retire from."

Other than aches and pains, Kondos seems in the prime of life. His hands are steady. His eyesight is good. His face is virtually unlined — he credits his Greek heritage and olive oil consumption. And he's nearly always in high spirits.

He and his second wife, Toni, own homes in Sacramento. Pacific Grove. Santa



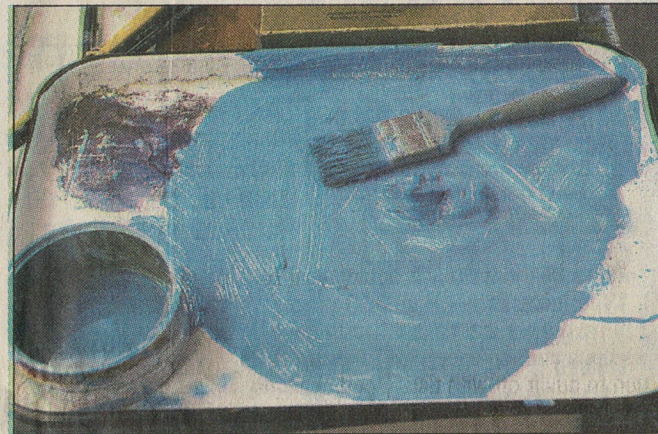
decades. "Works by Fred Dalkey, Gregory Kondos and Wayne Thiebaud" hang in the campus gallery that bears his name.

He paints or draws nearly every day and is completing a series of paintings based on the irises in his garden in France. He has stacks of small canvases tucked here and there in his studios, each bearing a sketch that awaits his brush strokes.

"If I live long enough," he says. "I'll finish them." He

Greg," said Melza Barr. She and her husband, Ted, are major donors to the Crocker Art Museum, giving it the California Impressionist gallery for the new wing that opens Oct. 10. She has been a student of Kondos.

"He knows the nuances of the river, from the bends to its width and flow. He knows the trees lining the levees and that flat expanse of farmland, all of which he depicts in that luscious paint and color."



A gallery with a new home at Sacramento City College, top, is named for Kondos; its first exhibit features some of his works. Left, Kondos submitted this scale model for a 12-foot canvas to hang at the Sacramento airport. Above, a mixing tray filled with one of his favorite colors.

A, a \$400,000 commission.

For years, Kondos has worked somewhat in the shadow of his friend Wayne Thiebaud, arguably the most celebrated painter ever to call Sacramento home. In 2007, Thiebaud's "Seven Suckers" (1970) sold for \$4.52 million at auction, a record price for a California artist.

"I don't think Kondos has yet gotten the due that he will have," said Shields. "His reputation can only go up. If you look at the paintings that have come up at auction in recent years, there is a resurgence of interest in him."

Two years ago, Kondos' "Beach Girl" (1970) went for \$54,000 at auction. The price was nearly \$40,000 over the pre-sale estimate.

bed of Kondos' pickup, park somewhere beside the Sacramento River and paint in silence for hours at a time.

"It's been great to share art with a great guy like Wayne all these years," Kondos said.

It was at Thiebaud's invitation in 1956 that Kondos began his long tenure at the college. Thiebaud, chairman of the art department, was taking a year's sabbatical and asked Kondos to fill in. Upon his return, Thiebaud arranged for Kondos to stay.

When Kondos retired in 1982, the campus art gallery was renamed in his honor.

He has long been a force in the Sacramento art scene. He, Thiebaud and other local artists in 1958 founded Sacramento's first private art gallery, the Artists Cooperative Gallery. Four years later,

"The first time I became aware of Greg Kondos was in the early 1950s at the California State Fair. Prior to the opening of the fair, I ... was employed as a gardener. Wayne Thiebaud and Greg were painting an enormous abstract panorama for a backdrop to the main bandstand. We gardeners would start each day where they were painting, and we would give them our very candid, uninvited advice. ... They never took offense, as far as I know."

—Ted Barr, Sacramento-born Texas businessman who, with his wife, Melza, gave the new California Impressionist gallery to the Crocker Art Museum

"When I first came to the museum, I remember seeing 'Landscape, Fair Oaks' (1960), which is in our collection. It's a beautiful painting because of his jewel-like colors and tones that are just fabulous, but also the way the paint is handled. It has some bravado to it. I think it is my favorite Kondos."

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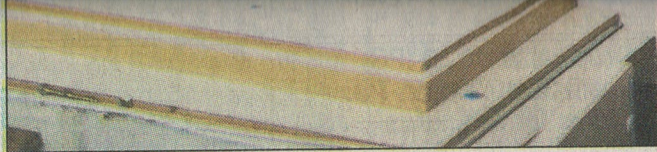
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Other than aches and pains, Kondos seems in the prime of life. His hands are steady. His eyesight is good. His face is virtually unlined - he credits his Greek heritage and olive oil consumption. And he's nearly always in high spirits.

He and his second wife, Moni, own homes in Sacramento, Pacific Grove, Santa Fe and the south of France. He has an art studio at each residence, along with this airy work space beside the Sacramento River. Here he has for company Louie, a neighbor's dog, and an occasional housefly.

The big canvas destined for the airport is propped on a couple of little Rubbermaid stepstools, with room to spare below the studio's 17-foot ceiling. Natural light filters through blackberry bushes outside the windows. The artist's palette is a sheet of clear glass over white paper - that lets him see the colors, swirls of greens and blues, in their purest state. Sometimes he rests in a rocking chair, fussing about the mess he'll clean up someday and promising Louie a dog treat, any minute now.

Kondos is busy - and tireless. In October, as a guest of the Chinese government, he'll exhibit two of his Yosemite paintings at Expo Shanghai 2010. And he's part of a show at Sacramento City College, where he taught for nearly three



decades. "Works by Fred Dalkey, Gregory Kondos and Wayne Thiebaud" hang in the campus gallery that bears his name.

He paints or draws nearly every day and is completing a series of paintings based on the irises in his garden in France. He has stacks of small canvases tucked here and there in his studios, each bearing a sketch that awaits his brush strokes.

"If I live long enough," he says, "I'll finish them." He pulls out a canvas. "This is of a statue in Cézanne's studio, and it's just as ugly as that." He sets it aside and takes another in hand. "This is a French soldier waiting at a train station. If people sit around too long, I'll draw them.

"I'd rather do this than anything," he says. "It keeps me alive."

## Of light and landscape

Kondos is a contemporary landscape painter known for spectacular shades of blue. His work is influenced in part by French painters Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin.

He returns again and again to paint the soaring rock faces at Yosemite National Park, the ancient ruins of Arizona's Canyon de Chelly and Southwestern panoramas, France's Mount Sainte-Victoire (known as "Cézanne's mountain"), the Mediterranean Sea in Greece and, of course, the river-scape south of Sacramento.

"I don't think any artist better captures the Sacramento River Delta than

Greg," said Melza Barr. She and her husband, Ted, are major donors to the Crocker Art Museum, giving it the California Impressionist gallery for the new wing that opens Oct. 10. She has been a student of Kondos.

"He knows the nuances of the river, from the bends to its width and flow. He knows the trees lining the levees and that flat expanse of farmland, all of which he depicts in that luscious paint and color.

"You can almost identify a Kondos painting from the color or the expanse of the sky or the way he paints."

Kondos' talent has made him wealthy, though he lives fairly frugally and invests his money in real estate. The airport painting will earn him about \$65,000, minus \$1,200 for the scaffold.

"Sutter's Gold" is to hang in the new international arrivals area, accessible only by ticketed passengers. Installation of public art in the new terminal will begin in January, Willis said. Kondos' painting, far more fragile than sculpture, will be the final piece to hang after construction and cleanup are completed. His deadline to deliver the work is September 2011, but he plans to finish it in a couple of months - he has another large canvas, depicting a Napa Valley vineyard, that he's eager to paint.

This is Kondos' second public art piece for the airport. In 1998, he completed the 570-foot-long glass mural "River's Edge" for Terminal

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## Finding art in the Valley

Kondos was born April 2, 1923, in Lynn, Mass., the second of Kanela and Steve Kondos' three children. They came to Sacramento in 1927, lured by Northern California's more agreeable climate.

Steve Kondos was a barber. He bought a house at 34th and C streets, where years later Gregory and his wife Rosie would raise their own children.

Kondos' first brush with art was a pen-and-ink drawing class at Sacramento High School. At Sacramento Junior College (now Sacramento City College), he got a C in a color and design class, a fact that forever cemented his opinion that artists' talent should never be graded. Two years later, he was teaching that color and design class.

His friendship with Thiebaud, three years his senior, began in the late 1940s when they were both students at what's now California State University, Sacramento. For years, they would set up easels in the

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He has long been a force in the Sacramento art scene. He, Thiebaud and other local artists in 1958 founded Sacramento's first private art gallery, the Artists Cooperative Gallery. Four years later, Kondos became chairman of the junior college's art department and had his first solo exhibition at the then-Crocker Art Gallery. Today, the Crocker Art Museum has 21 Kondos works in its permanent collection.

Kondos and the former Rosie Thalass, whom he married in 1951, had two children. Steve is a mechanical engineer "who just got through measuring the universe," said his dad. And daughter Valorie Kondos Field, a former Sacramento Ballet dancer, is head gymnastics coach at UCLA.

In 1985, six months after Rosie Kondos died of cancer, Gregory Kondos met Moni Van Camp, a lively woman who managed a midtown art gallery. "When I met him, I bowed," she said with a laugh. "My ex-husband and I had been trying to buy his art for years."

She married Kondos in 1996.

## A serene life

It's lunchtime, and Kondos is sitting at a picnic

seeing 'Landscape, Fair Oaks' (1960), which is in our collection. It's a beautiful painting because of his jewel-like colors and tones that are just fabulous, but also the way the paint is handled. It has some bravado to it. I think it is my favorite Kondos."

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table beside the Sacramento River at Clarksburg, eating a mushroom burger and his favorite food, french fries.

He's in a place he loves and is feeling contemplative. "I can stay here, with the river, forever," he says. "I don't need the excitement of the asphalt.

"Everything that we have, I've done. All those trees. When you see the shadows falling into the river, you know what time of day it is. You can look at the water and see if you can pull out reflections. It is a paradise. Here I find serenity."

A half hour away, in his Sacramento studio, Kondos has a small black-and-white photograph that his daughter took shortly after Rosie died. It shows him standing some distance away, alone on the beach in Carmel, the Pacific roiling at his back.

To him, it speaks volumes about the man he is.

"I'm a loner," he says, eyes twinkling. "When I die, I would like to have that on my coffin. Nothing else. Just that."

Call The Bee's Dixie Reid, (916) 321-1134.