

BY VICTORIA DALKEY - BEE ART CORRESPONDENT

As he approaches his 90th birthday, Sacramento painter Gregory Kondos walks with a cane and has a constant ache in his shoulder from holding up a paintbrush. But he insists he is doing his best work yet, and he is ready to tackle an 8-foot-tall canvas.

"As long as I can hold on, I can swing that brush," he said at the Crocker Art Museum, where a retrospective of more than 50 years of his work opens today. Titled "A Touch of Blue: Landscapes by Gregory Kondos," the show will include approximately 70 works that cover all of the settings in which he has painted the land.

Kondos has painted in the American Southwest and Europe, but he is best known for his paintings of sites in California, from coastal areas and Napa vineyards to Yosemite and, perhaps most enduringly, the Sacramento River. His retrospective is aptly titled, for it is the color blue that appears in most of his works, great swaths of ultramarine or phthalo blue defining sky and water.

"Blue is an interesting color," said Kondos' longtime friend and associate Wayne Thiebaud. "It's really a perfect idea for his show. It's a color that presents a dichotomy. It's sentimental as in 'My Blue Heaven' but also tortured as in getting the blues, which Greg does from time to time."

Kondos, who was born in 1923 and has lived in Sacramento since 1927, himself presents a dichotomy. On the one hand, he describes himself as a "people person," but he also says he is a loner. It was as a child fishing with his father on the Sacramento River, and later going out alone in a small boat, that he made his connection with the landscape.

"He's widely traveled, but he has a solitary communion with nature that characterizes his work," said Crocker chief curator Scott Shields, who organized "A Touch of Blue."

"In this he is a lot like Edgar Payne," an early California artist who also painted the landscape in California, the Southwest and Europe, said Shields.

Unlike Payne, whose images of California are in an earlier tradition, Kondos, said Shields, "strikes a balance between realism and abstraction, concentrating on paint-handling more than the subject." In this, Shields said, he is more like Selden Gile and the Society of Six painters who marked the switch in California art from subject to emotive application of paint.

Thiebaud finds Kondos' work essentially abstract and emotional in temperament.

"He makes a sweeping gesture and then adds detail with quick stops like exclamation points. He addresses horizons, rivers, seas, those things that change constantly with looseness and freedom and a kind of brush dancing," Thiebaud noted.

Melza Barr, who with her oilman husband, Ted, is an avid collector of Kondos' work and has attended workshops he has led in the Southwest, Greece and France, also admires the abstract qualities of his work.

As a teacher, she said, he was very encouraging and emphasized the basics, doing a complete charcoal sketch on the canvas, defining light and dark values, and simplifying forms before proceeding to add color.

She discovered another secret to his work when Kondos and his students were out painting in the French countryside near the Pyrenees.

"There was a white farmer's hut and a tall cypress tree," she recalled. "We all spread out, 10 or 12 students, getting different angles. Looking at Greg, I realized he was doing a similar view to mine.

"I was pleased with mine until I saw his. His composition was much better than mine and then I realized he had moved the Pyrenees in his."

"I am a man who moves mountains," Kondos agreed.

He also uses color emotively rather than realistically, a method he learned from studying the works of Paul Gauguin.

"He'd paint pink sand or a yellow Christ," said Kondos, who often adds a pink tree or orange palm to his river scenes.

"I also learned from (Paul) Cezanne," he added. "I learned the importance of shadows from him, to give solidity and space to the painting."

Another influence was Willem de Kooning, whose gestural abstraction of the figure led Kondos to experiment with vigorous paint application. But the real breakthrough in his work came when he traveled to Greece, the homeland of his immigrant parents, in 1963.



Gregory Kondos poses with one of his paintings at the Crocker Art Museum, where a major show of his landscapes opens today. [Isterling@sacbee.com](mailto:isterling@sacbee.com)

Taking a leave of absence from teaching at Sacramento City College, where he was chairman of the art department, he moved his wife, Rosie, and their two children to Greece for a nine-month sojourn. Though he expected to come home with lots of paintings of Greece, he spent more of his time looking than working. Instead of painting, he immersed himself in the life of the peasants he met.

"I lived with the people, fished with the fishermen, sold sheep with the shepherds," he mused. "I smelled the air and looked at the color of the water. I walked around the Parthenon and heard the echoes of the ancient warriors running around."

It was in Greece that he developed his signature palette of blue and white.

"The Greek flag is blue and white," he noted. "When you go to Greece, it's blue when you wake up in the morning. The light bounces off the rocks, the water is deep blue, and all the buildings are white."

Returning to Sacramento, he threw himself into painting and teaching. Though he retired from teaching in 1982, he still visits the campus regularly.

"He's very supportive of the gallery that bears his name," said Chris Daubert, the current chairman of the art department. "He makes generous gifts of his drawings; he comes over and signs posters to raise money for the art department; he takes delight in cornering students and telling them Greg stories. He's a walking bit of living history."

Concurrently with his show at the Crocker, Kondos will have a show of his drawings at the Kondos Gallery on campus, opening in early April, just in time for his birthday. Suzanne Adan and Michael Stevens, who direct the gallery, have raised \$6,000 to produce a catalog of the show.

The Crocker exhibit is accompanied by a beautifully illustrated 288-page hardcover book written by Shields. Underwriting is by the Barrs, major donors to the Crocker who live in Houston and have ties to Sacramento.

The exhibit is a marvelous tribute to Kondos, who has shown both nationally and internationally and has received much acclaim outside the Sacramento region. He is a member of the prestigious National Academy of Design and in 1993 won an Academy Award in Art from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

"Greg Kondos," said Ted Barr, "is one of the most important California painters over the last five decades. He's a true local treasure."

"Both the exhibit and the book will surprise people. It was surprising to me to see the variety and continuing evolution of his work. He paints everything from Yosemite to the Delta, to the Southwest and New Mexico, to Greece and France.

"And yet when you look at his work, they are all Kondoses."