

GREGORY KONDOS

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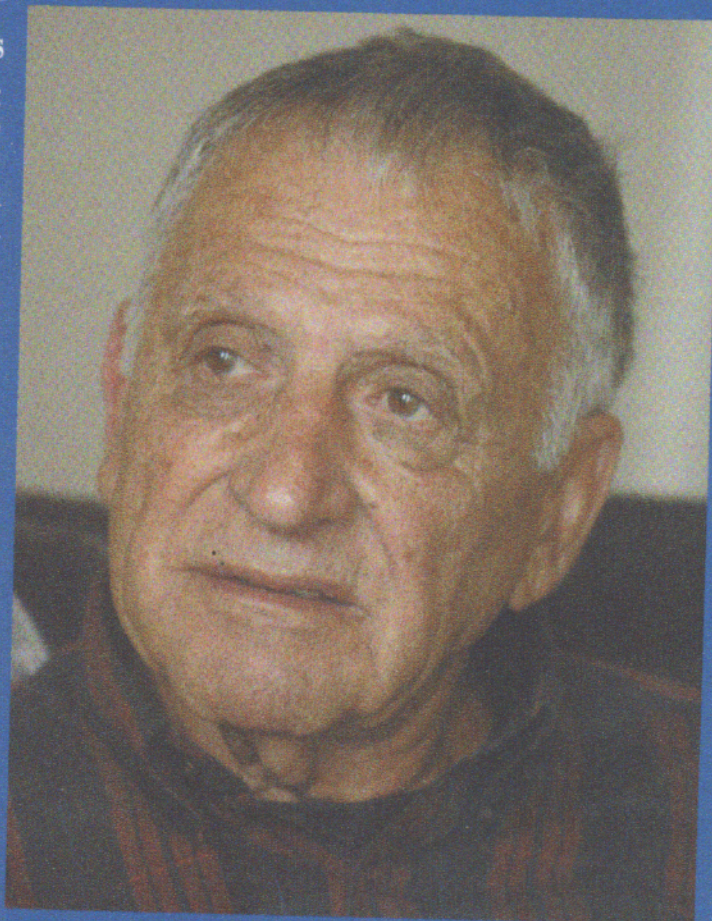


Even if you don't know the name Gregory Kondos, you'd likely recognize his work. The bold colors, open spaces and natural beauty of his contemporary landscapes have left an indelible mark on the American art scene. Which makes me wonder, what am I doing here trying to critique his work? Even I know when I'm out of my league. Gregory Kondos has been painting and teaching art for longer than I've been alive. My sitting here trying to unravel the artistic complexities of a Kondos painting is a lot like having a freshman biology student critique Stephen Hawking and I'm not going to do it. Instead I'm going to focus on the man, because understanding the artist is the best way to understand his paintings, and therefore his legacy.

KONDOS 101

The first thing you need to know about Gregory Kondos is that he is a man who speaks his mind. So when I asked him about the whole "art vs. artist" thing, and whether it is a necessary step to understand the artist in order to understand his work, this is what he said: "Absolutely! Absolutely, I mean I would stake my life on that. When you think about abstract expressionism, the first thing that comes to you is de Koonig and Pollack. But if you just think about the drip and dribble of Pollack and rush of de Koonig, that's not enough. You've got to know they were drinkers, they were lovers. You've got to understand all of that, and then you've got to understand their aches and pains." With that I stopped being an interviewer and started being a student. And this is what I learned.

Image: Gregory Kondos at home in Pacific Grove, CA



While Gregory Kondos is no tortured prince of Denmark, you'd think he was the one who took Polonius' advice in Hamlet, "To thine own self be true." And he has. He's proud of his life, his children, his Greek heritage and his painting, which has varied little over the past half century. Kondos is a landscape artist, and a plein air painter, the kind that restores your faith in this process which has been so bastardized by Sunday hobbyists, it is hardly taken seriously by art critics. "I'm a contemporary landscape painter. I'm one that is not working like the roman-

ticists, or the classicists, or whatever; I'm a real 20th century painter of the landscape and I've proven that it works." And his critical and commercial successes show that it does work. He's won too many awards to list here and he's a member of the National Academy in New York. When so many others chased art trends, Kondos quietly kept painting nature and beauty and it worked. Why? It's a question, Kondos has asked himself. "Why is this little landscape of mine connecting? Because I think it has substance... I've developed a pattern, a palette and maybe, if you want to call it, a style that is mine in a way and people can see from a distance, 'Oh, that's a Kondos.' And they recognize the years of work at one glance and that, I love. To think they could connect that quickly."

Kondos doesn't just love nature, he lives it. "I'm one of the very few plein air painters that really chases nature, works outdoors." That's why he has so many homes, in all the places he loves to paint, and from where he draws inspiration from the natural beauty and the other masters who have gone before him. From the Aix-en-Provence, where Cezanne painted, to the Southwest and the influences of Georgia O'Keefe, to the majestic beauty of Point Lobos and the Central Coast, he is able to breathe in the art - the nature and beauty of these surroundings. "We're not imitators of nature we're really recorders of nature." He says of his plein air style, "When you talk about photorealists and things like that, they really don't even come close to nature. You have to figure in the negative space of nature, and the smells out there, and the weather changes. I want to actually make you feel that you belong in the painting."

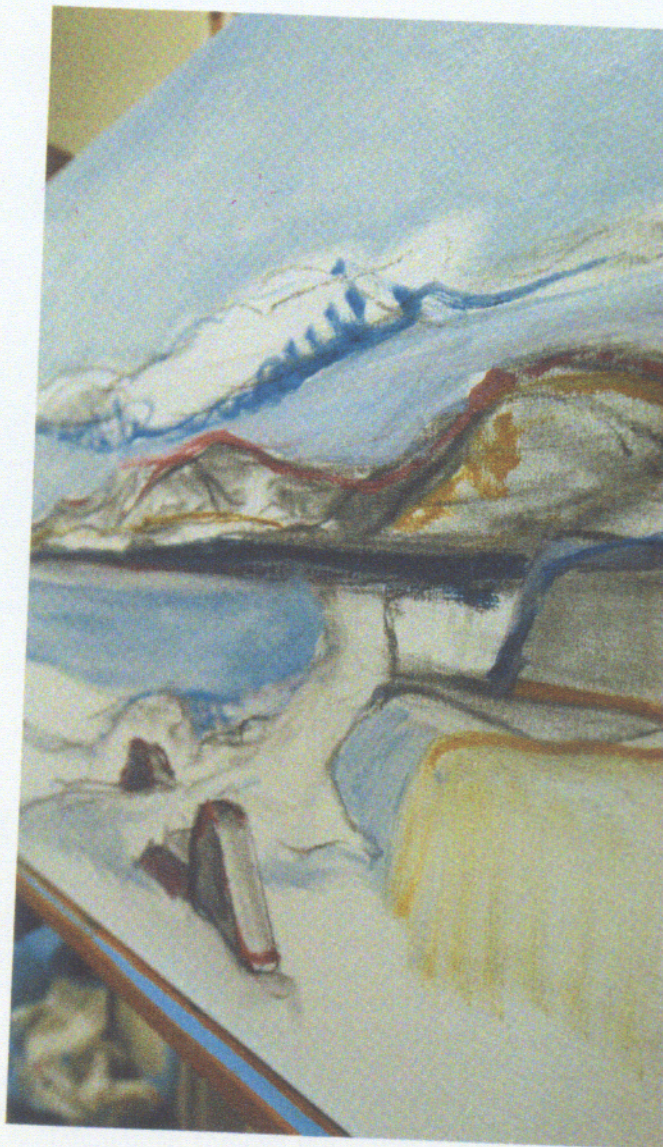
A Father's Faith

To be able to step into a painting and inhabit it, an artist has to understand space. Kondos does. It's something he learned not at any school, but in studying the great artists who paved this path before him, artists from different schools and styles but who achieved a harmony of space. "This is where Cezanne comes in, because, architectonically, he was correct," Kondos says admiringly. "You could walk into a painting from a telephone poll to a rock, to a house, to a tree, and you could measure the space and this is the kind of thing that I've been working for. Everyone thinks that Jackson Pollack was working for infinity in space. No, he had layers, he was calculating that space. You can only go on so deep into one of his paintings." How far can you go into a Kondos painting? Only as far as you're willing to step into his world, but Kondos' paintings provide an excellent road map.

Kondos' world would have been dramatically different if not for one fateful day, December 7, 1942, a day that changed everything for so many. "The thing was that war broke out and I volunteered and went in the Navy. I ended up two years at sea on an aircraft carrier. I was doodling on the carrier making little drawings for people. Somehow the skipper saw the drawings and he wanted me to draw him. I had to do it from a photograph, because he was busy. But it did give me a chance to drink the beer out of his refrigerator, so I took longer to complete the drawing," he recalls. It seems like an odd place to begin a career as an artist, but that's how it happened. "Then he says, 'Ok, you're the ship's official artist.' So I had to lean over the bridge and paint Japanese flags when we shot a plane down. Here I was drawing a little decal, and I realized, 'Hey, I'm a painter, something's happening here.' That's my first real assignment, painting Japanese flags."

It was an unusual beginning to such a great career. When he came back, Kondos knew he had to paint. It was no longer what he wanted to do, it was what he needed to do. His time at sea, on the water gazing out at the unending horizon, unleashed something in him, and his life would never be the same. It was this new commitment and dedication that led him to confront his father. For the son of immigrants, telling one's parents that you wanted to become a painter was no easy task. "The Greek attitude, their gift, is for their children to get educated. That's the biggest gift you can give them. Money means nothing to them really, except education. So... I declared I wanted to be something - naturally you're thinking about immigrants and what do they want, success that is a sure thing," he says. Becoming a painter was about as far from sure success as any parent can imagine, and for immigrants, well, the American Dream does not usually involve a niche for the starving artist, still Kondos knew what had to be done. "Finally, I got out of the service and my biggest challenge was to face my father and tell him what I was going to do. I had the GI Bill, and I went up to my dad and I had my fingers crossed and I said I'm going to go to school. He was thrilled. Then I told him, I want to be an artist. I looked at him and he hesitated for

a minute, then said, 'Go for it.' And so that was it. It meant so much to me to get his support." Kondos still becomes emotional as he relives the moment still so clear in his mind. And his father did support him, sending him what extra money he had to help Greg stay in school. It was his father's support that kept Kondos motivated: "Finally, I had to prove to him that I could do it. I did have the talent. I felt that somewhere this was burning inside."



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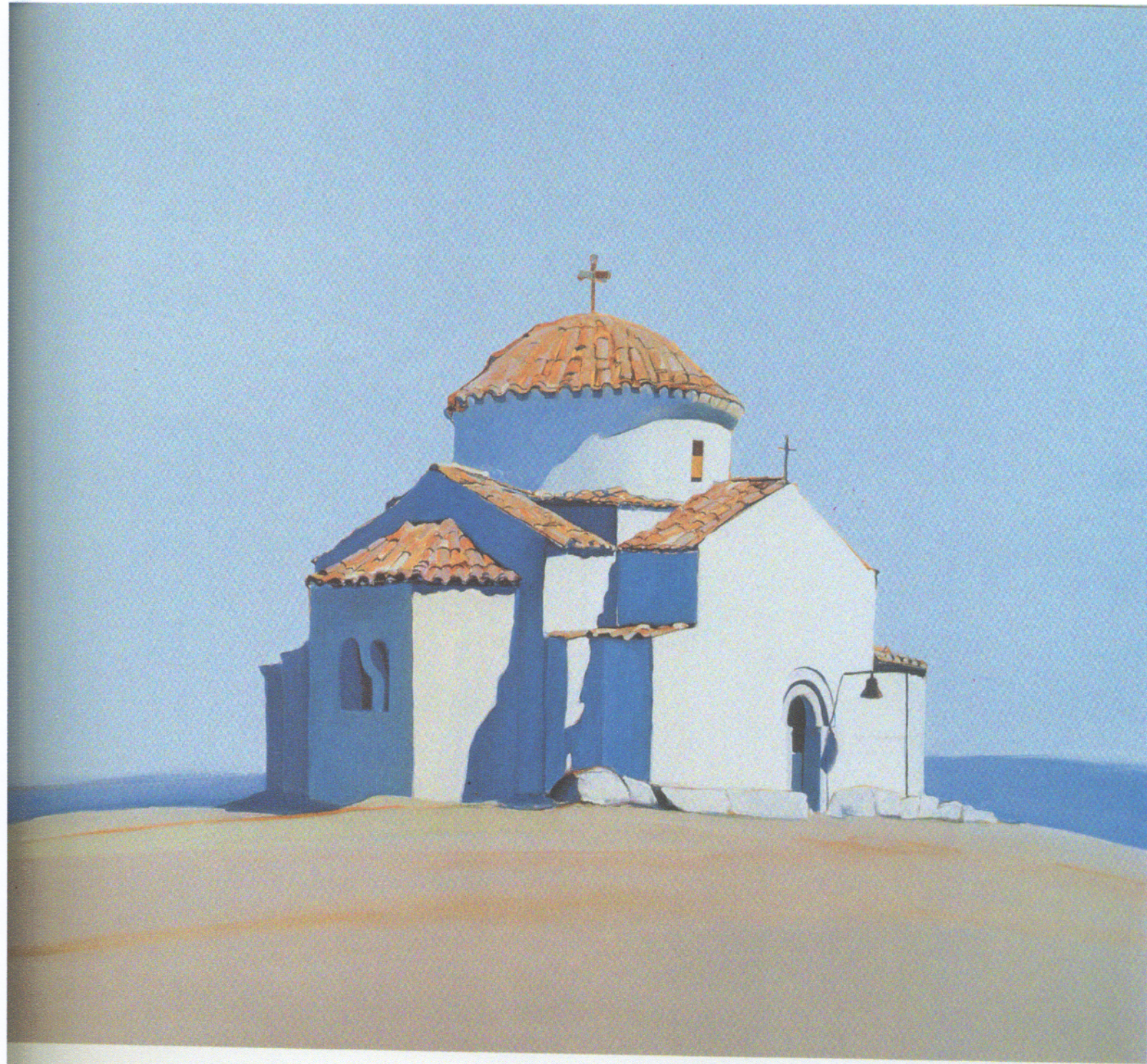


Without these two, Sacramento would not have the art legacy that it does. *They are Sacramento art and both still call it home.*

Kondos' early art education was limited. "I don't think I was a very good student because I really didn't put my mind to being a good student. I liked art, but I didn't know it. I only had one art class all through high school." So he started from the beginning. He learned the discipline, the structure of art at Art Center in Los Angeles. Then he returned to Sacramento to get his B.A. and M.A., studying at a city college and California State University at Sacramento. And it was there that fate again intervened when he met fellow Sacramento artist Wayne Thiebaud. Together over the next fifty years, the two would forge a friendship and a bond that would change not only their lives, but the face of Sacramento art forever. "We didn't see anything happening in Sacramento with art," he said, "We were painting together outdoors, trying to create things in Sacramento to make art happen with seriousness." He said. Kondos and Thiebaud both began teaching art and painting

after class and on the weekends. They were burning the candle at both ends. "We loved painting and there were times when we'd have a holiday and we'd stay up for almost three days, just painting at school, off of a still life of fruit. And before the three days were over, we ate all the fruit." Without these two, Sacramento would not have the art legacy that it does. They are Sacramento art and both still call it home.

By this time, Kondos fell into a comfortable routine. Teaching provided a steady income, and he was painting with his good friend, Wayne Thiebaud. He had also married by this point, and had two small children. Things were good for Gregory Kondos but he still felt something was missing. He heard the siren's call and again he answered it. In 1963, he quit his job, sold his house, paid off all of his bills, cut all of his strings that were tying him to Sacramento and took a sabbatical. And



there could only be one place he was going, a place he was always meant to go - Greece. Kondos packed up the kids and his wife and took the train to New York. Then they boarded the Queen Frederica and set sail on a great adventure. And out of this adventure, Kondos the painter was born. "So I finally ended up in Greece for 10 months. I took three trunks of art supplies with me, stretch bars, canvas, paints, you name it - three trunks full and thirteen suitcases. But I didn't open the trunks at all, not one! I didn't do any painting," he says. It is almost unimaginable to think that the biggest turning point in Kondos' professional career came during a time when he didn't paint. But, always the teacher, he explains, "You know what I did? I did something that I missed as a student. That

was to look. So what I did was go out to the ruins from morning to night and I'd watch the light change and I'd watch the shadows get longer, and I'd watch the fishing boats go by with their sails as they passed through the water and as the light tingled on the surface of the water. Those things meant so much to me. I got into the color changes in nature itself by just observing. And so for a year I was just a student of nature. I came home twice the painter I would have been if I didn't take that leave." He came back and with a renewed zeal. He and Wayne once again immersed themselves in the northern California art scene. They entered contests, won many of them, and got their names out. The recognition quickly followed and Kondos' career took off.



Determined and intense concentration - Kondos working in his Pacific Grove studio.



But he never stopped being a student. A constant observer, he was fascinated by the lives of other artists, his mentors, painters like Cezanne. It is his own zeal helping him to understand what made his mentors tick, what makes them great. "Because I felt that if I can reach that artist...I could find out why he is important and what made him important then, maybe, I had a chance to extend my career or make me feel that I could do that." He says, "I was asked on television once, if I had Cezanne in front of me, what would I say to him? I thought, 'What a stupid question,' but I answered it. I said, 'You know what I would do? I would open up his mouth and I'd reach down his throat and pull his heart out. And then in that cavity where the heart was, I'd look at all those beautiful paintings.'" He continues, "Because to me, he's my mentor and he's made it possible for me to understand that art is not a game, it's a great thing to understand and to love, and with his direction I developed what I have, style or whatever you want to call it. And I haven't changed very much, except that I think my paintings are richer and I think I am a better painter today... I'm doing better work today than I did before." Kondos tells me that there are three types of painters: the "splash and hoppers,"

the wannabes and the truly successful painters. What is he? "I'm not a 'splash and hoper' anymore, and I'm not a wannabe. I'm happy at this level that I'm at. And I'm successful, and I'm history and that's my life."

Even with all of his success, Greg Kondos is not slowing down. It must be the work ethic instilled in him from his parents. He's working towards his upcoming show in Greece next year. It's a show that is a culmination of his years of hard work, but it's also a more personal show for him this time. "Mount Olympus, that's where all the gods came from in mythology. Zeus is up there sitting on his little throne and I hope he's got a little chair for me someday. It's a payback to my parents," he tells me, "My father was a barber and my mother worked in the canneries and I said to myself when I accepted the show, 'Dad, this is for you and for mom.' And so, anyway, I'm not signing off, it's just that I've accomplished this step in the back of my mind that I felt, somehow, if I can do it, just let me do it."

*Gregory Kondos is represented by Hawk Fine Arts
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