

April 20, 2021  
Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church  
Sacramento

Gregory Kondos painted in Greece, France, the American Southwest, and, especially, in California. Many of his paintings included signs of humanity's presence, the land having been shaped and altered by development. This is true of his paintings of cultivated vineyards and fields, and especially of his scenes of Sacramento's rivers and levee system.

In other works, Gregory presented nature at its most elemental, taking the eternity and wonder of places like Yosemite National Park and the Desert Southwest, as his theme. In all of his paintings, he celebrated the land's inherent formal properties, along with the beauty and possibilities of paint itself. Though he moved between abstraction and representation, his commitment to landscape painting never wavered.

Gregory was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, to Greek immigrant parents. He moved to Sacramento when he was four. He was extremely proud of his Greek heritage and would have been very happy to have his celebration of his life here, at Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church.

As a child, he helped supplement his family's income by selling newspapers, working at a shoeshine stand, and as a shop clerk. At Sutter Junior High School, he won a Golden Key for art. At Sacramento High School, he was a member of their champion track team. When he was deciding upon his career path, he remembered his fear in telling his father that he wanted to be an artist. His father simply said, "Go for it."

In 1941, Gregory began attending Sacramento Junior College and taking art classes, but his early training was interrupted when he enlisted in the Navy during World War II. He began his tour of duty in the Pacific on an aircraft

carrier. During his down time, he drew sketches of crewmates, earning an unofficial position as the resident “ship’s artist,” which confirmed his desire to make art a career, and not just a hobby.

It was on his first of his many trips to Greece in 1963 that Gregory learned his palette of blues and whites. It was also there that he discovered the solid forms and simple geometries of boldly shadowed buildings bathed in sunlight. Prior to this, his paintings had been flatter and more Abstract Expressionist, but as he began to introduce shadows and three-dimensional weight, his paintings gained power and became the works we today recognize as quintessentially Kondos.

Before Gregory, landscapes of the Sacramento region were rare, as few artists before him thought the Central Valley offered enough interesting subjects for painting. Gregory proved his predecessors wrong. He said to me once, “I can stand in one spot and see five landscapes worth painting. Here, here, here, and here.” He found beauty in our region that most others overlooked. In so doing, he changed the way we see our home and, by extension, how we see ourselves.

When he went to Yosemite, Gregory had to learn to capture the immensity of the landscape. He did so by overemphasizing the scale to give viewers a sense of how the landscape felt, not just how it appeared. As one of Yosemite’s artists-in-residence, he was able to truly get to know his subject matter so he could portray it with understanding. “I am really led by the most important teacher out there,” he’d say, “and that’s nature.”

As much as for his art, Gregory was known equally for his bluster. You have all heard him say, “I’m a great painter!” And yet, this was not the sensitive man I came to know. He would also frequently state, “I am still a student. I am always

learning.” I remember a specific encounter when he showed me a new painting. I said “Wow, that’s a really good one.” He looked me right in the eye and said with great sincerity, “I just want you to be proud of me.”

I remember fondly Gregory’s invitations to come down to his studio and see his most recent work. He would explain his process and talk about the place portrayed. As abstract as they were, it was always possible to tell if his paintings depicted California, France, or Greece. He understood how to distill the essence of a place.

Gregory loved painting so much that he managed to do it even when his body was giving up. After his cataract surgery he said, “I cried. I saw colors I had not seen in years.” His paintings had been growing progressively lighter as his vision grew darker, but after the surgery his colors once again became strong.

Later, when he was largely confined to a wheelchair, he had a pole installed in his studio so he could pull himself up to reach the top of his canvases, literally making art by sheer force of will. I was also there when he also told a room full of guests, “When Moni gets bored I can do a little pole dance for her.” Gregory was incredibly lucky to have Moni.

On one of my visits, Gregory showed me a tiny work on paper that he had done entirely in purple. It was a painting of an iris. He delightedly told me he had painted it with the sap of the iris itself, which dripped on his desk as the flower aged and died. He dipped his brush into what he called the iris’s “blood” and created something permanent with the loss.

Like this small painting of an iris, Gregory left us all with something permanent, his art, and it is that art which will survive long beyond any of us in this room.

Generations from now, people will know Gregory through drawings and canvases. We, however, were fortunate to also have known the man himself.

“I’m a great painter!,” Gregory would say. To which I think we would all respond, “Yes, you were, and we are proud of you.”

- Scott Shields, Chief Curator & Associate Director of Crocker Museum, Sacramento, CA