

Paint it blue

On the eve of his 90th birthday, Gregory Kondos discusses a lifetime of landscapes, his love for Sacramento and why he's big in China

By [Jim Cameron](#)

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Gregory Kondos, 89, didn't start painting seriously until he was 25.
PHOTO BY WILLIAM LEUNG

Just a few weeks shy of his 90th birthday, Gregory Kondos still displays the intellectual vigor and acuity of a man one-third his age. The old master pulls no punches, displaying the honesty and candor that's been a highlight of his approach to life.

Consider: “When I was asked to do a major piece of work for Terminal A at the [Sacramento International] Airport years ago, I took the job, even though the money was peanuts,” Kondos says.

And where other artists turned down the job “because of the price,” he adds, “I did it because I owe that to the community. That’ll be my legacy. This is my city.”



COURTESY OF THE CROCKER ART MUSEUM

Kondos is just as direct when asked, “Why paint?”

“Why live?” he responds. “Painting has been my life for over 60 years. I love it and can’t imagine doing anything else.”

A snapshot of that life is currently on display at the Crocker Art Museum. *A Touch of Blue: Landscapes of Gregory Kondos* highlights the artist’s famed landscapes. Kondos, who will discuss his works at the museum on Saturday, March 23, also has works on display at the Blue Line Arts gallery in Roseville; in April, Sacramento City College will feature his black-and-white sketches.

The Crocker exhibition is vast in its scope with 70 of the artist’s signature landscapes—pieces that appear deceptively simple. Here, there are no tricks or gimmicks or scenes meant to shock or titillate,

just beautiful images that exude warmth and peace, yet also awaken the senses with the provocative color and composition.



Inspired by a Life magazine artist working aboard his ship, Kondos started sketching while in the Navy; "Cairo," black-and-white drawing, 1977.

COURTESY OF THE GREGORY KONDOS GALLERY

Kondos' signature blue paint prominent, he employs bold brush strokes, adding touches of pinks, yellows, reds, purples and greens in unusual ways.

Throughout the landscapes, Kondos' distinctive trees and mountains are shaped in a style that's often emulated by a legion of imitators.

Of course, Kondos is not without his own influences.

The artist's acknowledged reverences for French post-impressionist painter Paul Cézanne and the Dutch abstract impressionist Willem de Kooning weave their way into the viewer's consciousness.



The son of Greek immigrants, Kondos has visited Greece 43 times since 1963; “Kalamata Beach, Greece” oil on canvas, 2006.

COURTESY OF THE CROCKER ART MUSEUM

“If you can get just a piece of Cézanne in your art, you’ve accomplished a great deal,” Kondos says. “I believe I’ve been able to do that, and studying the boldness of de Kooning’s work helped release me from a more conservative style.”

Kondos didn’t always think about being an artist; he didn’t start painting seriously, in fact, until he was 25.

“I was serving in the Navy when I saw a Life magazine artist sketching scenes aboard ship. So, I tried sketching,” Kondos recalls. “He told me I was good. Then the captain noticed me and asked me to sketch him in exchange for beer. That sounded good to me, and that’s when it all started.”

After his discharge from the Navy, Kondos studied art at Sacramento State University with the approval of his parents.



This Kondos landscape, “Mont Sainte-Victorie” (oil, 2011), depicts a province in France and is one of the artist’s favorites.

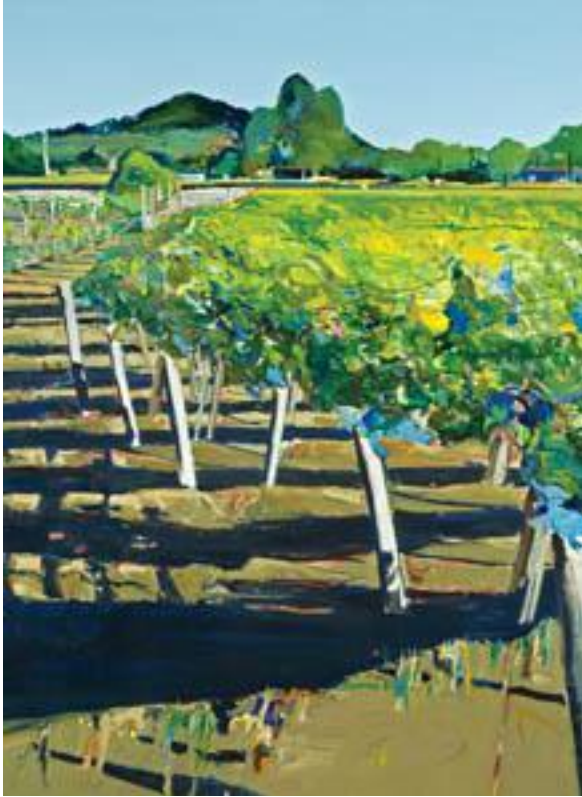
COURTESY OF THE CROCKER ART MUSEUM

“My parents weren’t art people and never saw a show of mine. But they always supported me,” he says.

Now, Midtown’s Elliott Fouts Gallery owner Elliott Fouts calls Kondos “a giant.”

“[He’s] defined the Sacramento landscape,” Fouts says.

“Through years of devotion to this subject, he’s taken ownership of it,” he adds. “His selfless sharing of his insights through classroom and seminar settings over the last 60 years have ensured that three generations of painters carry on the traditions he established and, at 90, still perfects.”



Many of Kondos' paintings reflect his life in the Sacramento region; "Rutherford Vineyard," oil, 1989.

COURTESY OF THE CROCKER ART MUSEUM

Sacramento fabric artist Merle Axelrad agrees; for her Kondos' impact reaches far beyond technique.

"Thirteen years ago when I rented a studio on R Street, Greg had a studio just across the hall, and he'd often stop in to comment on my work," Axelrad says. "His observations were always clear and insightful, with an eye to paring things down to a focused and strong statement. It's a hallmark of his work that I value."

Kondos, who taught at Sacramento City College for 27 years, says he sees such mentorships as opportunity.

"My celebration of life is the work that I do. I get a lot of pleasure from helping young people with their painting," he says.



Kondos taught at Sacramento City College for 27 years, and the gallery on campus is named after him.

PHOTO BY WILLIAM LEUNG

Kondos' latest venture is a foray into China, where culture-hungry art patrons have greeted his landscapes with enthusiasm.

Ningbo and Shanghai, in particular, are at the epicenter of Kondos' new adventure. In 2010, the Ningbo Museum of Art hosted an exposition of Kondos' work and two of his paintings, "French Irises" and "The Pacific Coast" were added to the museum's permanent collection. Likewise, the Shanghai Art Museum placed "El Capitan" in its collection of modern traditional pieces and pop art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai added "Half Dome" to its permanent collection.

Kondos' global reach is vast.

The son of Greek immigrants, Kondos' first visit to Greece in 1963 was instrumental in establishing the style and tenor of his work, and he has since been back 43 times.



Although the artist uses a multihued palette, Kondos is most famous for his use of blue paint.

PHOTO BY WILLIAM LEUNG

“I never really knew who I was, and in Greece, I began to understand what my beginnings were all about,” Kondos says. “I carried water with villagers from wells to their tiny homes, ate their food and walked with shepherds as they tended to their flocks. I’ve sat alone and sketched the countryside for hundreds of hours. I immersed myself in nature and soaked up the culture of my forebears.”

Crocker Art Museum director Lial Jones says Kondos’ work captures “the spirit of the land.”

“His paintings of the Sacramento Valley and the Delta are as iconic and picturesque as any other places on Earth,” Jones says. “Through his stunningly beautiful painting we learn to better appreciate the abstract and colorful artistry of the world around us.”

Kondos’ own assessment of his work is simpler.

“I record nature without a camera.”