The Art and Times of Victor Joseph Gatto

by Gene Epstein

Some men, to their disadvantage, think of art as the province of women. It is the mother, the wife, who decorates, who cares about what hangs on the living room wall. Real men don't bother with such matters.

Joe Gatto, certainly, appeared to be this kind of man. When, at age forty-five, he first began to paint, he seemed to have brought almost nothing artistic with him from an earlier life. He was a New Yorker, a South Village hanger-about, a solitary who entertained himself with pulp westems and B movies - a broken-nosed, Jimmy Durante-voiced ex-boxer with a dishonorable World War I discharge from the Navy and a prison record from the Twenties. His personality was sometimes sweet, sometimes cantankerous, at times unmanageable. Then he discovered that he could be an artist.

The story goes that he got to talking with some exhibitors at the semi-annual Greenwich Village art show in 1938. He was informed that a man could make as much as $600 from a single painting. Gatto, who had incurred a "herny" while working as a steamfitter's helper, and had time on his hands, decided to become an exhibitor himself.

This made sense. Teddy Roosevelt had once visited eight-year-old Joe Gatto's classroom and had seen one of his drawings on the blackboard. His comment, as Gatto remembered it, was, "You're the best drawer in the whole school." A compliment like this can last a lifetime. Now, almost forty years later, the moment had arrived for Joe Gatto to become Victor Joseph Gatto, American primitive painter.

He was born in 1893 at 41 Thompson Street in the kind of New York City tenement that is in the backyard of another tenement. In a letter, he claimed to have remembered his actual birth. In the neighborhood, there are still old men who recall Joe Gatto - not as a painter but as a not-too-bad featherweight fighter who had taken the count only once. They tell you that because one of his brothers, John, was a mobster, Joe was sent to prison for a robbery in which he was not involved. They also intimate illegal doings in which he

was involved. Joe was known as the kind of guy who did things that were hard to do. Once, for instance, he walked from New York City to Niagara Falls. It took him six weeks, and later, from memory, he painted an indelible portrait of the Falls.

Gatto had no illusions about his life, or where he was from. "I was always a hard luck guy," is the way he described himself, and he had his reasons. His mother died when he was four, and his father, a laborer, had to put him and his four brothers into an orphanage. Until a beloved stepmother (to whom he remained deeply attached until she died in 1944) appeared, he had four motherless and miserable years. He was raised as a religious Catholic. His ability to read and write remained on a fifth-grade level, which was when he left school to earn a living. He became a professional boxer in 1913, had more than thirty fights in six years, and took some savage beatings. There were the years in Dannemora prison - a notoriously bleak institution in the northern reaches of New York State - from which, reportedly, he twice tried to escape. The jobs he subsequently was able to hold were unskilled and low paying. To him, work was what you tried to avoid.

Yet, from his place in this heavily disadvantaged world, Gatto managed to create on canvas a romantic and splendid view of life. All the images that he had seen - in magazines and movies, in neighborhood churches, glimpsed from bus windows, in solitary dreams - all were to coalesce into his unique viewpoint.

He began to work with tiny brushes, without knowing how to mix colors or prepare a canvas. He tried to create form not by painterly illusion but by piling on paint. He persisted, and by the early Forties a body of work had emerged, a reputation. There were paintings of both the inner and outer eye, open windows to his soul. These were paintings that turned aquariums into oceans deep, Florida Everglades into primeval jungles, outer space into planets on which more comprehensible civilizations than his own could exist.

"I guess I'm a kind of hermit," he told Winthrop Sargeant, of Life magazine. His paintings are full of loneliness. They were done by a soul forever apart, who mourned a lost paradise, who feared an infernal darkness, who bemoaned the lost years, who yearned for companionship, yet who was full of living. Painting after painting celebrates the evening skies, the distant horizons, the waving grass and stormy sea. They depict the events of war and peace in which others, not oneself, participate. Above all, these are paintings that tell us, in their own fashion, what Joe Gatto, an unlettered outsider in contemporary America, saw and, with dime store brushes, turned into art.

By 1940, he had been discovered by collectors of modern primitives, a genre of art categorized only three decades earlier by those who recognized and took seriously the untutored genius of Henri Rousseau. In 1943, the Charles Barzansky Gallery, on Madison Avenue, gave him his first one-man show. It was a triumph. "True personal fantasy," said the *New York Times*. The *World-Telegram* said, "As good as Utrillo at his early best." Gregoire Tarnopol, the well-known Parisian collector of Picasso, Matisse and Renoir, said, "Gatto is the only American in my collection. I like him better than Rousseau."

Gatto netted $2200 from the show. With this, he bought some art supplies, treated his friends and acquaintances to restaurant meals and, apparently, spent most of the rest to finance a bus trip to Florida. (There is a painting from this time, before the civil rights clashes in Birmingham and Selma, of an ancient Greyhound parked in rural Georgia: the well-dressed black passengers are shown standing in the rear). He also bought a tombstone for his parents' grave.

He was the subject of laudatory feature articles in *Esquire and Colliers* , and, in 1948, a *Life* photo essay. *Town and Country* used his paintings for two of its covers (its editor was a Gatto collector), and columnists of the day regularly found him a source of copy. There are even reports that he was the subject of one in a series of short films on American artists produced in those years by Time, Inc.

His work was bought and exhibited by major museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the

Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of the City of New York, the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Pennsvlvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the Detroit Institute of Arts. He was collected by, among others, Alfred Bloomingdale, Syrie (Mrs. Somerset) Maugham, Clare Booth Luce, Lorelle Hearst, Rosalind Russell, Phyllis Warburg, John Steinbeck, Alastair Martin (the Metropolitan Museum's Guennol Collection), Herman Shumlin and Lawrence Rockefeller.

Recognition on this scale should mean, ordinarily, that an artist could thereafter work in reasonably well-funded comfort. There should be continuing sales and increasing prices. Such a fortunate artist might even think of buying a home, an automobile, living a regular life.

But almost nothing like this came to Gatto, nor did he know how to pursue it. Perhaps he had started out too far behind. Solvency escaped him while he continued to live the life of a New York City knockabout. At the height of his career, his time was spent in Greenwich Village furnished rooms - a scrawny figure painting in his shirtsleeves, a chair as his easel, a plate (or his fingernails) as a palette. Winters, he took the bus to Florida, where he stayed in the less expensive Miami Beach hotels - preferably those that could offer him an unskilled job. Many of his barely literate letters are on hotel stationery: *Biscayne Plaza Hotel, overlooking Bayfront Park and Biscayne Bay.*

Not that there weren't those who helped him, or tried to. He could always count on a meal and conversation at the tiny Greenwich Village walkup of his friends, Lou and Lillian Codina. Fellow painter Sterling Strauser, an early admirer, and his wife, Dorothy, residents of East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, did their best to make Gatto comfortable during various summers in the country near the Delaware Water Gap In the mid-Fifties. Ivan Black, the publicist with a fine arts degree from Harvard, who had first brought Gatto to the attention of the Barzansky Gallery, boarded him for a year at his Woodstock, New York home. Gatto even found occasional residence in the Pennsylvania home of John, the brother he accused of framing him, whom he professed to hate ("for all the things he done to me"), and whose housekeeper was at one time madam of one of John's brothels.

Invariably, these visits ended in disharmony. No matter what the sacrifices made or inconveniences suffered by his hosts, Gatto would leave in anger, convinced that because

things weren't going entirely his way he was somehow being taken advantage of. Eventually, when he needed to, he would return, just as if nothing had happened.

He was suspicious of almost everyone. His first dealers, Charles and Bess Barzanski, who advanced him money when they couldn't afford to, and readily gave him exhibitions when he sent them sufficient paintings, had to contend with his third-party complaints, delivered with scarcely bridled anti-Semitism, about their alleged stinginess and chicanery. Friends and admirers, like Sterling Strauser and Ivan Black were also complained of. He was, if you give credence to his claims, continually cheated, abused, insulted, taken for a fool. And there were those on whom he, even in his fifties, would use an ex-pugilist's still deadly fists. Among those who knew him, agreement is general that Gatto was his own worst ambassador.

Bess Barzansky has spoken of the time in the Fifties when members of the Rockefeller family were buying Gatto's work. "But then they stopped coming in," she said, "and I could never figure out why. It wasn't until years later that I learned that my big mistake was to tell Joe that a Rockefeller had bought one of his paintings. When he found out, he wrote them a letter. It must have been the kind of letter that made their security people think it might not be such a good idea to continue knowing this man. Maybe they saw it as a threat. I never saw it, but I do know he was a terrible speller, and they probably misunderstood him."

In Sidney Janis's seminal *The Taught Themselves*, published by Dial Press in 1942 (just before Gatto became widely known), other great primitives - Hirshfield, Moses, Pippin, Kane, Sullivan, Lehduska - had their work represented in plates. Gatto was almost an afterthought, mentioned as one of a number of worthy self-taught painters omitted because of space limitations. Of that list, only Gatto's name now looms large. Sterling Strauser recalls that when Janis was queried about his omission by one of Gatto's admirers, his reply was. "I probably would have included him if he hadn't come into my gallery and told me how lousy all my artists were and how great he was."

In his book, Janis wrote of the artists he had included: "Although convinced that they have made a photographic representation of the world of reality, they have actually transmuted it into a new pictorial reality. For whether painting reality, fantasy, allegory, or any of the endless types of art upon which a self-taught artist focuses, he functions with the utmost freedom. Forever finding himself in fresh and untried fields, he must forever invent, create and discover."

These words could have been written with Gatto in mind. That they weren't is also part of the story. Gatto continued to have little sense of the business end of art, or how his words and behavior affected other people. He had no idea that those who revered Henri Rousseau as the first and greatest of all modern primitives might be irritated by a less-acclaimed latter-day primitive who, in a newspaper column, was quoted as saying, "I went to look at that Rousseau they're talking about. The guy's been stealin' my stuff for years." Or who, interviewed in a radio talk show in the Fifties, says, "Rousseau only uses five kinds of green. I use seventy."

It was as if he regarded the creation of art as similar to battling a ring opponent. You had to outpaint the competition and, if you could, intimidate others with your greater reputation. He was polite about the work of Grandma Moses, perhaps because she was a woman and, thus, not a contender in his eyes.

Yet, despite his abrasiveness, his personality had a sweet, open, sincerely generous side. "He would give half his hamburger to a hungry dog," remarked Dorothy Strauser. Said Sterling Strauser, "He was always ready to give money to people who were down on their luck, and he expected nothing in return."

As is characteristic of painters in his genre, Gatto attained his permanent level of skill early on. It was his subject matter that evolved. Ivan Black felt he has something to do with this evolution, and wrote: "My bid for immortality is that I got him out of the jungle. I bought several of his Congo pictures, then suggested that he paint familiar scenes around New York City - Washington Square, Coney Island, Columbus Circle and the like. I commissioned him to do this. In fact, he was on my payroll for almost a year, to paint or not paint, as he wished."

Whatever the effect of this suggestion on Gatto's imagination, there was little doubt that Black's subsidy of $25 per week opened the door to Gatto's eagerness to produce. No artist could ever have worked harder on a grant. He is known to have worked on a painting for as long as twenty-six hours at a stretch. Even so, some paintings took months to complete.

But it was his expansion of subject that amazed his admirers. In his first one man exhibit, in the fall of 1943, he had moved away from his self-resembling lions (Gatto means cat in Italian), tigers and elephants in the midst of tropical foliage. Now, there were wild horses galloping in the moonlight, a beach at Fire Island where watery fingers from an ominous

Atlantic reached out toward tranquil sunbathers on the sand. You saw the shipyard Kearny where he voluntarily went off Ivan Black's payroll and onto a wartime job. There was "Guadalcanal," a haunting island on which dead Japanese in ghostly white uniforms were strewn on the beach under the gaze of the Marines who killed them. You saw a portrait of God, molding man from clay.

The years that followed were a monument to what an underdeveloped intellect can do with a solid ego, a great talent, and a determination to succeed. By the late Forties and early Fifties, he had reached a point of confidence in himself where he was willing and able to attempt anything on canvas. Yet, much of his best work went unsold, even at prices suitable to Washington Square, where it all began. He could not make a living from his art. He continued to move from place to place, trying the patience of friends.

In Florida, poor as ever, he worked rather than vacationed. But he was, as the late author and columnist Jim Bishop put it, "rich in weather." He liked to remind friends up north how unfortunate they were, compared to him: "It must be very cold up the North. That's why I came down to Miami, to duck cold weather." But, as his letters reflect, there was trouble in this paradise: "I caught a water moccasin that nip my flesh, was sore for a few weeks. Where I work at, the]umber has lizards, snakes and scorpions hidden under them. I will be going to a different job tomorrow. Still, pitching dirt with a shovel, it some real hard labor, little pay. I wouldn't forget the tight pinch I was in, the way you help. Best wishes to you, your wife and daughter. Wishing you all the best of health and luck. Your friend, Victor Joseph Gatto. General Delivery, Miami. Fla."

His great desire was to have enough money to play his system at a Miami dog track, and he wrote detailed letters to possible backers to show how well he could have done if he had laid down actual bets. Posterity is left with his version of the track he liked to visit.

By 1956, Florida had lost its charm. The weather was cold. He wrote "... enough is enough. I quit now. I haven't the spirit anymore to paint. I lost my gift. They all say paint, but why? Make others rich someday... Yes, I play the dogs. Poor dogs, they want their meals."

He thought, though. that he had found a woman. "Little Mary," who worked at the same hotel as he and wanted him to quit painting and get a steady job. "I better marry her," he wrote to a friend. "She Irish, redhead, my style, 38 years old." But it didn't last. Three days later, he wrote that he had found Little Mary drunk, that the housekeeper thinks she is a wino. They both quit, and she was no longer mentioned. Instead, he wrote how sorry

the housekeeper was that he quit after he told her he was a famous painter who could make $300 for two hours work.

As the years went by, his ability to work at any kind of job diminished. There were incessant quarrels with hotel housekeepers and deskmen who, he wrote, underpaid and overworked him. There were illnesses and operations. Sales of his paintings grew ever more sporadic. It became hard for him to afford the art supplies he needed, to find a place to work, even when he had energy. By 1960, his health was failing. He worried about his eyes, his lungs, his heart: "Things get bad when you get old." He informed his friends that he was finished. There was still some time, however, left to him. He went to Mexico to see whether he could live on his $56 Social Security checks in that less-expensive country, but decided he didn't like it there. "Too dirty," he wrote. "The people aren't like us. You should see what they do with their animals." He illustrated the bullfights that repelled him in his frequent and detailed letters, showing exactly what he meant in case his correspondent couldn't follow his handwriting or spelling.

In those days he did strange and charming pen and ink drawings on typing paper, many of them erotic. These took less effort and less investment in time and materials than oil paintings. The figures in the drawings were more graceful, more revealing of himself. Age did not stale his art.

There was, finally, at seventy-one, his death in Miami on May 27, 1965. He received a good-sized obituary in the New York Times ("Gatto's imagination and a highly individual gift of observation set him apart from most of the current primitives in a niche of his own."). The widowed Bess Barzansky paid for his burial. He was survived by his brother, John.