

# Profiling an influential Sri Lankan painter: Ivan Peries

BY SURANJITH L SENEVIRATNE

Some members of the Friends of Sri Lanka Association were fortunate to attend an exhibition of Ivan Peries paintings from the David Coates Collection, at the Grosvenor Gallery in London. Ivan Peries was a founder member of the Colombo 43 Group of Sri Lankan artists. This group consisted of several progressive Sri Lankan artists including: George Keyt, Justin Daraniyagala, George Claessen, Aubrey Collette and Ivan Peries, amongst others. The group was set up to showcase independent works of art by Sri Lankan artists. Martin Russel, the British academic, was the Patron of the Colombo 43 group from its inception, and Harry Pieris was its first secretary. The first exhibition of this group took place in December 1943.

Ivan Peries was born in 1921 and died in 1988. His parents were James Francis Peries (a medical doctor) and Ann Gertrude Winifred Jayasuriya. He had two brothers (Lester James Peries – who is considered the father of Sri Lankan Cinema – and Noel Peries) and one sister (Erica). He attended St Peter's College Colombo. He initially studied under internationally renowned painter, David Paynter and was then a pupil of Harry Pieris; Lionel Wendt played an important part in his early life and David Coates was a long term friend. In 1948, he won a scholarship to study



at the St John's Wood School of Art, in London. Following his studies there, he returned to Sri Lanka in 1949 and then got back to London in 1953. In 1955, he married Veronica Pery and settled in Southend-on-Sea. They had four children. Although he lived and worked for many years in the UK, his heart was always in Sri Lanka, as clearly illustrated in the paintings he produced.

The general themes of Mr Ivan Peries' paintings were of rural life and the ocean shoreline. Most were of his experiences in Sri Lanka. His paintings from the 1950's and 1960's, focussed on showing the

richness of Sri Lankan landscapes, coastal fishing villages and indigenous life. The seashore allegorically connected the shores of his homeland with his adopted home in Southend-on-sea. He was influenced by Fra Angelico (Italian painter), El Greco (Greek painter), Paul Cezanne (French post-impressionist painter) and Matisse (French Visual artist). Some of his early work includes: The wave (1955), The Bathers (1958-59), The Return (1959) and The Arrival (1959-60). In 1940, when he was 19 years old, he painted one of his seminal works: Homage to El Greco. This had been acquired by Lionel

Wendt. Martin Russel had also bought many of the works of Ivan Peries.

He exhibited with the 43 Group in London and Continental Europe. Some of these exhibitions included: Imperial Institute (1952), Petit Palais Paris (1953), Venice Biennale (1956 and 1958) and the Bear Lane Gallery in Oxford (1961 and 1963). In 1965, he held a large exhibition of paintings at St Catherine's College, University of Oxford. The Wala Kula painting was exhibited at this show. In 1979, he had a show at the Newman Rooms in Oxford. The broken and leaning tree series was produced in the early 1980's.

Within Sri Lanka, some of his paintings are on public display at the Sapumal Foundation. Some of his other paintings are found at the Imperial War Museum, The Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A), London's Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, the Petit Palais in Paris and Pembroke College in Oxford. For instance, Ambalama (1961) is found at the Junior Common Room, Pembroke College, University of Oxford, and Monk on the Seashore at Dehiwela (1985) is at the V&A. He has also done several watercolour paintings of standing and praying figures. He died shortly before the opening of the landmark exhibition: The other story: Afro-Asian artists in post-war Britain at the Haywood Gallery. This was curated by Rasheed Araeen.