



# Ivan Peries

Paintings from the  
David Coates Collection

**Grosvenor  
Gallery**

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15 February – 8 March 2024

**Grosvenor Gallery**  
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“...the first requisite of every art is deep conviction; that whatever is truly felt has also great power to move others.”

—Ananda Coomaraswamy



Portrait of Ivan Peries, reproduced in the catalogue for the 1958 Venice Biennale. *Homage to El Greco* in the background. Photograph by Vernon Richards, London

We are extremely fortunate to present a collection of paintings by the highly influential Sri Lankan painter Ivan Peries. These paintings – many of which have not been seen publicly for several decades, come from the collection of David Coates, a friend and long-time supporter of the Artist. It has been a great pleasure researching the period and working with David’s son Jacob, who has carefully and sensitively recorded his family’s history and association with Ivan and his paintings. For in depth reading on the life and career of Ivan Peries, see the seminal text *Ivan Peries, Paintings 1938–88*, by Senake Bandaranayake and Manel Fonseaka.

### **David Coates**

While reading Natural Sciences at Queen’s College Oxford, David Coates attended an exhibition of Ivan Peries’ paintings at St Catherine’s college in 1965. Fascinated by the works and the artist, he spent savings from his BP scholarship to buy his first paintings. He continued to follow and collect Peries’ work after further studies in economics and a career in the civil service, during which he developed a friendship and written correspondence with Ivan. David ended his career with over a decade as chief economist for the department of trade and industry. He was awarded a CBE in 2001, and continued working on regional development until his death in 2008. This is the first gallery exhibition of a selection of his paintings, now in the care of his children Emily and Jacob.

—Jacob Coates, 2024

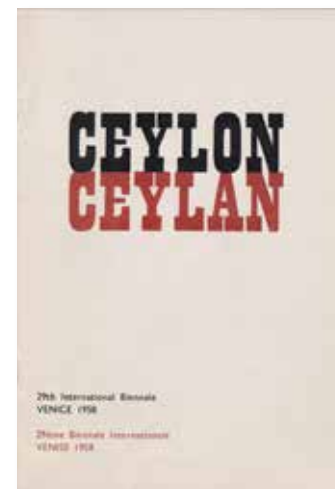
# Ivan Peries

(1921–1988)

Born on 31st July 1921 in Dehiwala, a rural suburb of southern Colombo, Ivan Peries studied as a boy at St. Peter's Roman Catholic College, Bamalapitiya. At the age of 17 he studied briefly under the painter and muralist David Paynter, who would later become head of the College of Fine Arts in Colombo. He was then taken under the wing of painter Harry Pieris who had studied at Shantiniketan and at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, and who would become his lifelong friend and mentor as well as secretary of the '43 Group and founder of the Sapumal Foundation.

Other key figures from early in his career are the photographer, musician and critic Lionel Wendt, whose patronage and support of the young artist contributed significantly to his early success. The English academic Martin Russell, stationed in Sri Lanka during the Second World War also developed a close relationship with Peries and was a major supporter throughout the 1940s.

In 1943, Ivan Peries played a key role in the formation of the *43 Group*. His idea to form an independent group of artists and intellectuals was supported by Lionel Wendt and Harry Pieris, with Ivan carrying out what Richard Gabriel described as 'the spade work' to get the group up and running in August that year, with the first exhibition taking place in December. It is no exaggeration to say that the Group is one of the most influential in the region in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



Venice Biennale catalogue, 1958

*"Few know how much the Group owes for its existence and development to Ivan Peries. It is no exaggeration to say that it would never have been started if it were not for this enthusiasm in rousing the painters, especially the older ones, from their unfortunate lethargy, caused by a traditional neglect and apathy on the part of the public to the real values in art."*<sup>1</sup> —Aubrey Collette, 1946

Peries left for London in 1948, on a government scholarship to study painting at the Anglo-French art centre in St John's Wood. Once in London he was exposed to international trends in contemporary art and the artistic developments of post-war London in the late 1940s and early '50s.

He returned to Sri Lanka for several years, but returned to the UK permanently in 1953, living in London and later Southend-on-Sea. During this time, he continued to exhibit with the 43 Group in Sri Lanka and overseas, as well as in London and on continental Europe; at The Imperial Institute (1952), Petit Palais, Paris (1953), AIA Gallery, London and Heffer Gallery, Cambridge (1954), the XXVIIIth. Venice Biennale (1956), XXIXth. Venice Biennale (1958), South London Art Gallery (1960), Bear Lane Gallery, Oxford (1961 and 1963) and at the Queenswood Gallery, to name a few. He also participated in several exhibitions at London's Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery.

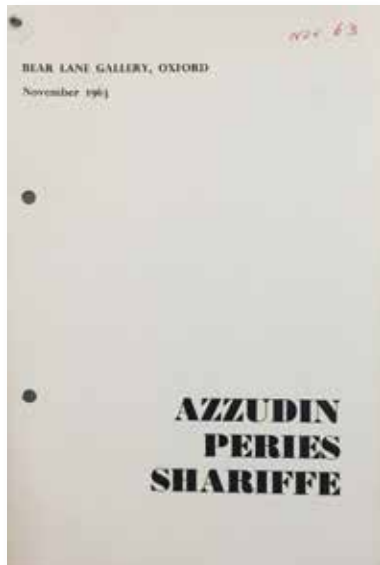
1965 Peries held a large retrospective exhibition of paintings, watercolours and collages at St. Catherine's College in Oxford. The exhibition featured loans from several private collectors, including Martin Russell, as well as paintings that are now considered masterpieces, including *The Arrival* (1959–60), the painting of which had very nearly cost Peries his sanity. How the exhibition came about is unknown, but it is likely to have resulted from his participation in shows at Bear Lane Gallery in the early 1960s. The works *Wala Kula II* and *Southend I* were exhibited in that show and acquired by David Coates from the exhibition.



Peries and Senake Bandaranayake at the Queenswood Gallery exhibition, 1962

Azzudin, Peries, Shariffe, Bear Lane Gallery, Oxford, November 1963

St Catherine's College exhibition catalogue, 1965

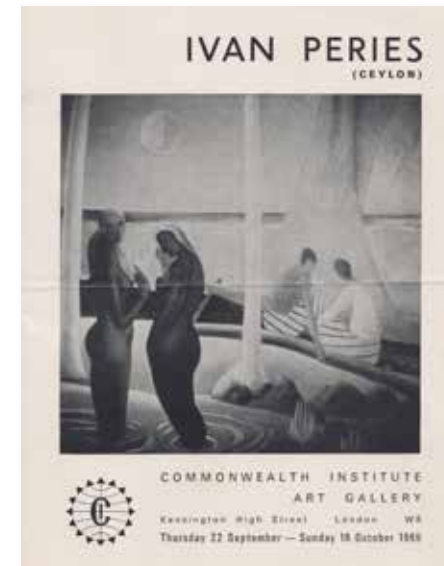


### Commonwealth Institute Exhibitions:

Peries exhibited several times at the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery – first in 1962 as part of an exhibition of Sri Lankan art, the first show held at the Institute's new gallery in South Kensington – and again in 1964 alongside George Keyt and several other members of the 43 Group. In December 1965 Peries was invited by Donald Bowen, (Assistant Curator at the Commonwealth Institute of Art) to exhibit at the gallery the following Autumn. Peries was given half of the exhibition space, with the remainder of the gallery hung with works by Indian artist Viren Sahai. The intention had been for Tyeb Mehta to exhibit, but for whatever reason this didn't happen.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition took place from 22<sup>nd</sup> September–16<sup>th</sup> October and contained 53 paintings, dating from 1940–1966 and including seminal paintings such as *Homage to El Greco* (1940), *The Bathers* (1958–59) and *The Arrival* (1959–60). (Two works from that show are part of our exhibition.)

Susan Groom of *The Arts Review* wrote: “*The calm, sensuous qualities of the work of Ivan Peries is instantly appealing to the eye, especially the paintings he was going some four and five years ago. 'The Arrival', 'Mora' and 'Wala Kala 1' (and 2 for that matter) are the best examples of this warm coloured and linear form period.*”<sup>3</sup>

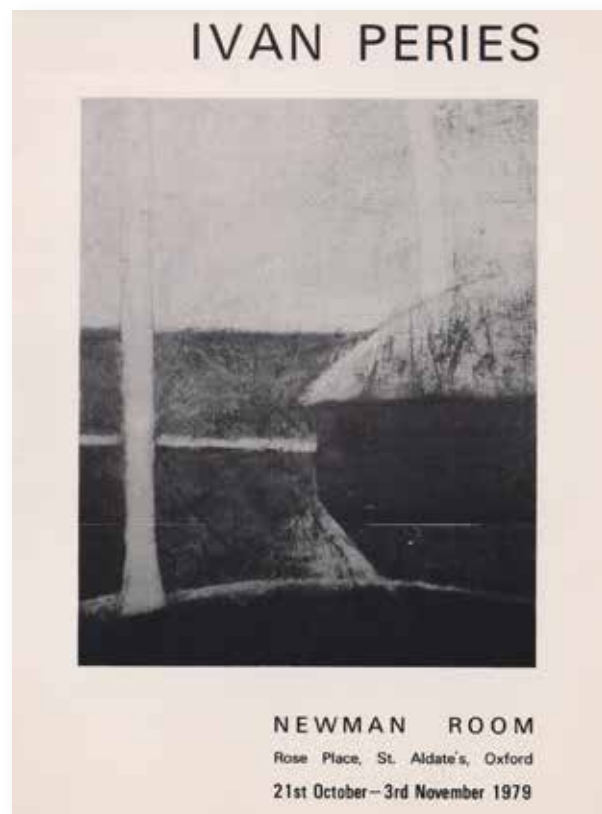
Much of the exhibition consisted of recent paintings dating to the early 1960s, which Bandaranayake and Fonseka describe as being “*marked by a quietness and seriousness of mood and deeply meditative realms of experience. These pictures were careful, and perfect compositions, static on the surface, but with a great deal of feeling and movement underneath.*”<sup>4</sup>



Peries' Commonwealth Institute exhibition catalogue

Peries exhibited a few more times in Sri Lanka as part of the 43 Group, but then experienced a dark period during the 1970s and went 10 years without an exhibition. The 1979 show at the Newman Rooms in Oxford was organised by his friends Jacob Coates and John Miskin and provided the Artist with a significant boost, consisting mainly of new works.

*“I have been working non-stop for an exhibition at Newman Rooms in Oxford. I have about 30 oils and 50 watercolours and drawings. The oils are among the best I have done – lovely quality and colour, subdued whites, greys, browns, blues and blacks.”*<sup>5</sup>



Newman Room  
exhibition catalogue,  
Oxford, 1979

The introduction notes in the Newman catalogue show Coates' and Miskin's admiration for Peries:

*“There are few painters whose imagery combines the eye of a poet with the spirit of a mystic. Ivan Peries is one. Painting for him is a spiritual exercise, for which technique, fully mastered, becomes servant.”*—David Coates and John Miskin, 1979



Exhibition invitation, 1979

During the last decade of his life, he continued to experience bouts of ill-health and worked tirelessly. Other than his experimental *Broken Tree* series of the early 1980s, much of the decade was spent reworking and refining themes and subjects from the past. There were solo and group exhibitions throughout the '80s, with renewed interest in his work emerging following his 1983 retrospective at the Sapumal Foundation.

1988 saw Peries preparing for his participation at Rasheed Araeen's seminal exhibition *'The Other Story, Afro-Asian artists in post-war Britain'*, held at London's Hayward Gallery. Sadly, Peries never saw the exhibition as he died of a heart attack on 13 February 1988, aged 66. His *Times* obituary stated *“His paintings evoke the coastal village and landscape of Sri Lanka with a visionary clarity. The possess haunting poignancy and above all, an intense but refined luminosity.”*<sup>6</sup>

Well known and revered in South Asia, Peries' work contributed significantly to the landscape of British art in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. His paintings are important and deserve greater attention.

### Charles Moore

London, 2024

#### Notes

1. Quoted in Senaka Bandaranayake and Manel Fonseka, *Ivan Peries Paintings, 1938-88*, Colombo, 1996, p.29
2. Letter from Donald Bowen to Ivan Peries, 30th December 1965
3. *The Arts Review*, 1 October 1966
4. Seneka Banandaranayake and Manel Fonseka, *Serendib*, Vol.15, No.4, 1996, p.28-29
5. Letter to Harry Peiris, 22 September 1979, quoted in Bandaranayake and Fonseka, *Ivan Peries Paintings, 1938-88*, Colombo, 1996, p.42
6. *The Times*, 23 February 1980, quoted in Bandaranayake and Fonseka, *Ivan Peries Paintings, 1938-88*, Colombo, 1996 p.42

*Wala Kula II*  
1963

Signed and dated  
'Ivan Peries/1963' lower left  
Oil on canvas  
100 x 64 cm  
39 3/8 x 25 1/4 in

**Provenance**

Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent

**Exhibitions**

Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, London,  
*Ceylon Paintings*, 7-19 February 1964, No. 41

St. Catherine's College, Oxford, *Ivan Peries*,  
*Exhibition of Paintings, collages, drawings and watercolours*,  
1940-1965, 18-29 October 1965, No. 46

Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, London, *Ivan Peries*,  
22 September-16 October 1966, No. 21, (price 35 guineas)

A common observation of Peries' paintings from this period is the rough, textured surface of his paintings, likened to fresco paintings - "Has this anything to do with the traditional rock/wall paintings of Sri Lanka."<sup>7</sup>

In letters to Harry Pieris from the mid-1960s, Peries describes the techniques used in his paintings from that period; "I applied the mixture of glue, whiting and zinc white almost directly without a primary coating of glue - hence the cracking which occurs when glazing - and it is quite safe."<sup>8</sup>

George Butcher wrote of these works: "His pictures are very classically conceived; they invite the contemplation of calm moments; and they are the very opposite of all those pictures today that scream raucously in many voices... Peries is often very skilful indeed. Some are built up with exquisite care, layer upon layer of paint on old, crackled canvases; others deftly exploit the textures of gesso upon board." - George Butcher, *Art Review*, 2 June 1962

7. Araeen, *The Other Story*, p. 20

8. Ivan Peries, quoted in a letter to Harry Pieris, circa 1965, quoted from Bandaranayake and Fonseka, *Ivan Peries Paintings, 1938-88*, p.40







*Southend I*  
1963-64

Oil and gesso on canvas laid on board  
77 x 63 cm  
30 1/4 x 24 3/4 in

**Provenance**

Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent

**Exhibitions**

St. Catherine's College, Oxford, *Ivan Peries, Exhibition of Paintings, collages, drawings and watercolours, 1940-1965*, 18-29 October 1965, No. 55

Painted shortly after the family's arrival in Southend in 1963, this is one from a small series of works depicting the sea-side town that was home until his death in 1988. Family life in Southend is credited as having a remarkably stabilising effect on the mind of Peries, who had and would continue to experience mental breakdowns, the most severe of which came after the completion of the 1960 work *The Arrival*.



*Head Study*  
1966

Signed and dated  
'Ivan Peries/1966' lower right  
Oil on board  
47 x 30 cm  
18 1/2 x 11 3/4 in

**Provenance**

Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent

**Exhibitions**

Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, London, *Ivan Peries*,  
22 September–16 October 1966, No. 49, (price 20 guineas)

**Publications**

Senake Bandaranayake and Manel Fonseka,  
*Ivan Peries Paintings, 1938–88*, Colombo, 1966,  
p. 40 (visible in photograph)



Sri Lankan High Commissioner  
Dr G.P. Malalasekera at Peries' exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, 1966. *Head Study* pictured in the background.



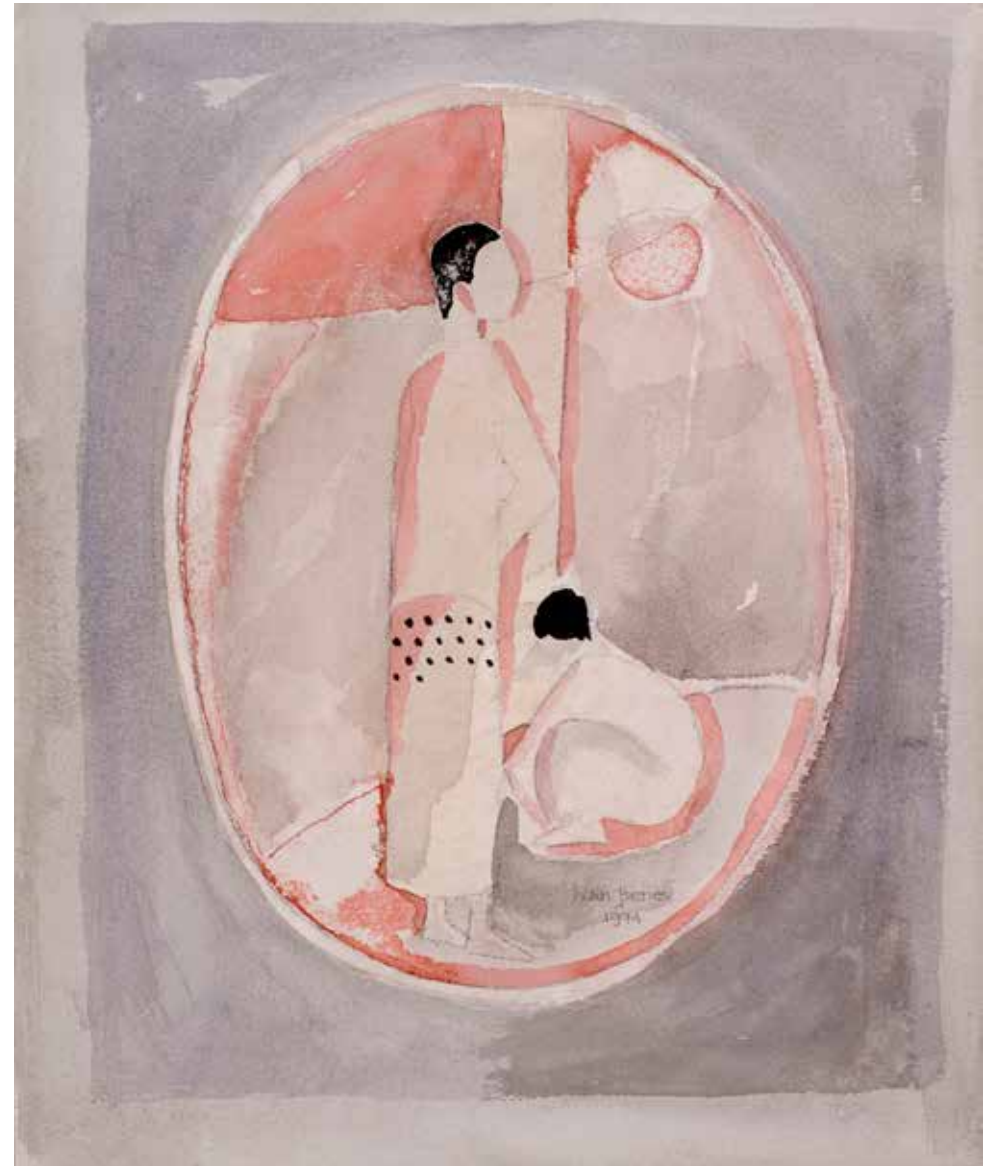


04

*Kalu Ira*  
1974

Signed and dated 'Ivan Peries 1974'  
lower right, further inscribed '(6)  
'The Brown Sun' or 'Kalu Ira' on the reverse  
Watercolour and pencil on paper  
50 x 40.2 cm  
19 3/4 x 15 7/8 in

**Provenance**  
Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent



05

*Untitled (The Wave)*  
1974

Signed and dated '74 IP' lower centre  
Watercolour and pencil on paper  
50,6 x 40,2 cm  
19 7/8 x 15 7/8 in

**Provenance**  
Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent



06

*Untitled (Head of a Man)*  
1974

Signed and dated 'IP '74' lower right  
and inscribed 'Davids' on the reverse  
Watercolour on paper  
29.6 x 20.8 cm  
11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in

**Provenance**  
Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent



07

*Untitled (Head)*  
Circa 1974

Signed 'IP' centre left  
Watercolour on paper  
29.6 x 20.8 cm  
11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in

**Provenance**  
Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent



*Cloud*  
1978

Signed and dated  
'Ivan Peries/1978' lower right  
Oil on canvas  
52 x 62 cm  
20 1/2 x 24 3/8 in

**Provenance**

Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent

**Exhibitions**

Newman Rooms, St. Aldgate's, Oxford, *Ivan Peries*,  
21 October–3 November 1979, No. 10

**Publications**

"Senake Bandaranayake and Manel Fonseka, *Ivan Peries*  
*Paintings, 1938-88*, Colombo, 1996, No. 100 (unpaginated)

*Each painting has its own distinctive artistic experience to offer and, like a rag in Indian classical music, served as a vehicle for the painter, to explore a series of subtle variations on a theme. Peries used robed figures, tree trunks and the sea in much the same way as other painters use the human body, the human face or still life."*<sup>9</sup>

9. Banandaranayake and Fonseka, *Serendib*, Vol.15, No.4, 1996, p.29





09

*Untitled (Head of a Boy)*  
1979

Signed and dated 'IP 79' lower right  
Watercolour on paper  
29.6 x 20.8 cm  
11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in

**Provenance**  
Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent



*Untitled (Head)*  
1982

Signed and dated '82 IP' along lower edge  
Watercolour on paper  
29.6 x 20.8 cm  
11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in

**Provenance**  
Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent



*Untitled (Seated Figures)*  
1982

Signed and dated 'IP 82' along lower edge  
Watercolour on paper  
20.8 x 29.6 cm  
8 1/4 x 11 5/8 in

**Provenance**

Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent



*Untitled (Figures in Red)*  
1982

Signed and dated 'IP 82'  
along upper edge  
Watercolour on paper  
29.6 x 20.8 cm  
11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in

**Provenance**  
Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent



*Untitled (Standing Figure in Black)*  
1982

Signed and dated 'IP 82' along  
upper edge  
Watercolour on paper  
29.6 x 20.8 cm  
11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in

**Provenance**  
Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent



*Untitled (Figures in Blue)*  
1982

Signed and dated 'IP 82'  
along upper edge  
Watercolour on paper  
29.6 x 20.8 cm  
11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in

**Provenance**  
Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent



*The Leaning Tree*  
1982

Initialed 'IP' in the centre  
and dated '82' left centre  
Oil on card  
64 x 90 cm  
25 1/4 x 35 3/8 in

**Provenance**

Collection of David Coates;  
(Thence by descent)

**Publications**

Senake Bandaranayake and Manel Fonseka, *Ivan Peries Paintings, 1938-88*, Colombo, 1996, No. 113

Some of Peries' last paintings were a series of variations on a theme, titled variously as *Broken Trees* and *Leaning Trees*. They are a curious development, the meaning of which is illusive, but which form an important part of his oeuvre in that they are a kind of summation and testament to a lifelong preoccupation with landscape and emotion. Several works from this series appeared in the 1989 exhibition *The Other Story, Afro-Asian artists in post-war Britain*, and are described by Rasheed Araeen; "He started to paint with rough brushstrokes, charged with tremendous energy, as if he had finally found a way to release all his repressed emotion. For these works, he used the same size of cardboard and the same motif - two trees of unequal size - to meditate upon and express what he could not before. The landscape was no longer that of Sri Lanka, but could be anywhere in the world."<sup>10</sup>

10. Rasheed Araeen, *The Other Story, Afro-Asian artists in post-war Britain*, London, 1989, p. 22



Peries' works hanging in *The Other Story*,  
Hayward Gallery, London 1989





*Untitled (Standing Figure)*  
1985

Signed and dated 'IP 85'  
along upper centre  
Watercolour on paper  
29.6 x 20.8 cm  
11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in

**Provenance**  
Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent



*Untitled (Seated Figure)*  
1985

Signed and dated 'IP 85'  
upper centre  
Watercolour on paper  
29.6 x 20.8 cm  
11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in

**Provenance**  
Collection of David Coates;  
Thence by descent



*Untitled (Seated Figure)*  
1986

Signed and dated 'IP 86'  
upper centre  
Watercolour on paper  
29.6 x 20.8 cm  
11 5/8 x 8 1/4 in

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Photography  
Justin Piperger

Design  
CHK Design

Grosvenor  
Gallery

## SOME REVIEWS

MANCHESTER GUARDIAN 27th September, 1952. S.A.

"....Peries....has evolved a strongly personal style and has entirely digested and made his own the influences which shaped him. His palette is dark without being sombre and there is a serenity in the figures of "the BATHERS" and "TWO MEN"

LES LETTRES FRANCAISES 19th November, 1953. Georges Besson.

"....varied, subtle, austere and powerful; bearing witness to superb craftsmanship."

ARTS NEWS AND REVIEW 23rd January, 1954. Peter de Francia

"At the A.I.A. Gallery ....the large canvases of Ivan Peries are outstanding amongst the work of the other six painters."

NEW STATESMAN AND NATION 16th August, 1958 John Berger.

(Ivan Peries) is one of the painters" who encouragingly remind us that art is independent to exactly the same degree as it discloses reality."

OXFORD MAIL 1st November, 1961. Richard Carr

"Almost the only artist to allow the eye to travel into the canvas is Ivan Peries, who uses perspective and is related to the Surrealist tradition. Particularly pleasing is his nude, with its soft, brown tones and rounded forms....."

THE TIMES 3rd November, 1961

"....beautiful 'Ambalawe'.....is a work of the utmost restraint and serenity."

ARTS REVIEW 2nd June, 1962. George Butcher

-exhibition at the Queenswood Gallery. "His pictures are very classically conceived; they invite the contemplation of calm moments; and they are the very opposite of all those pictures today that scream raucously in many voices .... In this kind of Art, everything depends upon the skill of the artists interpretation And Peries is often very skilful indeed. Some are built up with exquisite care, layer upon layer of paint on old, crackled canvases; others deftly exploit the textures of gesso upon board ...."

THE GUARDIAN 11th June, 1962. George Butcher

"....startling parallel between Peries and Albert Pincham Ryder. ....both are natural visionaries; both depend upon emotion, colour and rhythm; and both share a vision that is ultimately innocent as well as primitive. Such a personality has the strength of its limitations, for it is 'unteachable' and incorruptibly by the fashions of the day."

“There are few painters whose imagery combines the eye of a poet with the spirit of a mystic. Ivan Peries is one. Painting for him is a spiritual exercise, for which technique, fully mastered, becomes servant.”

— David Coates