

Vera Nilsson (1888-1979)
Swedish artist. An avantgarde pioneer who developed early her personal style. Acclaimed for her long, multi-faceted professional life producing oil and wallpaintings, experimenting with colour and form. Sketching was an integral part of her working process, a continuous visual diary and always exhibited. She was instrumental in the inclusion of art in the Stockholm underground and a dynamic visual voice in the fight for human rights, quality and peace.



Vera Nilsson – on the roll



Sketch: from the Greek *schedios*, done *extempore*. Rapidly executed freehand drawing, not intended as finished works, with the purpose of recording something seen, demonstrating an idea, principle or documentation of an idea for future use.

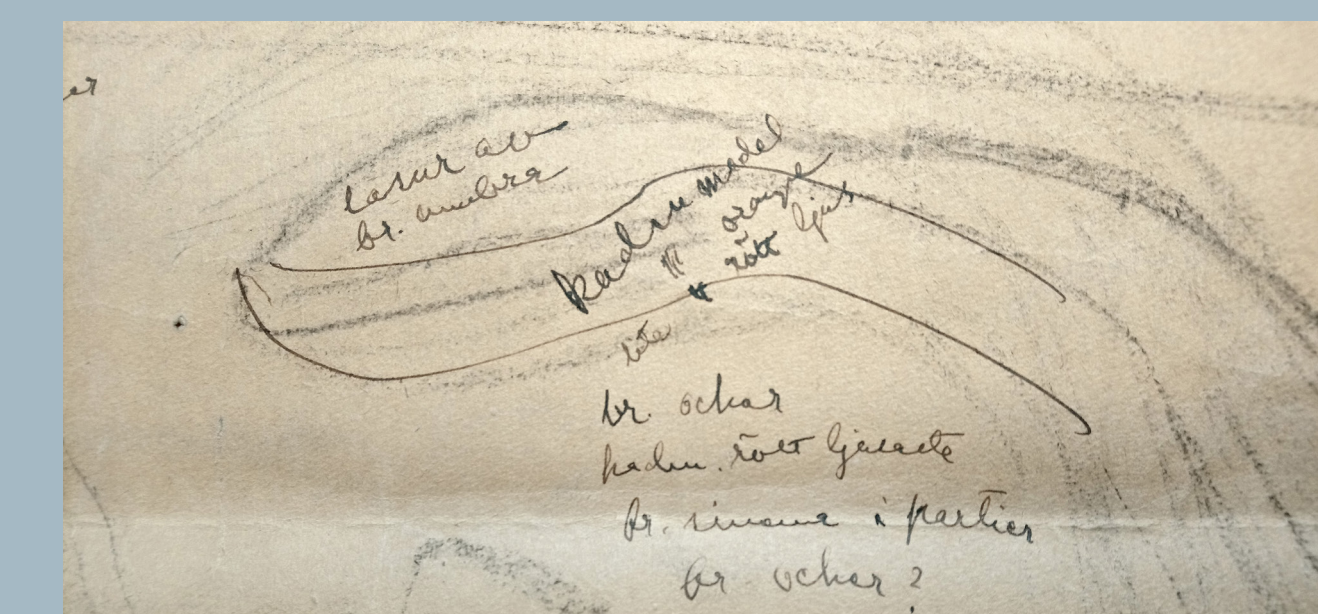


Kvinnor Stoppa Upprustningarna / Women. Stop Militarisation (trans.)
Sketchbook, 1972-73, Moderna Museet

Prior to a decision on formal accession the works required curatorial overview. Over three days the 105 works, varying in size from small format to preparatory sketches over 5m in length were examined in the photography studio, each rolled out carefully using many hands and weights. Digital images were taken accompanied by basic condition reporting and documentation, of size, technique, damages and annotations.



The sketches were often rolled tightly together, some were multiple sheets taped or glued together.



Translation of annotations '...cadmium medium... orange... a little light red... burnt ochre...'

The storage solutions fit into the wider system used at Moderna Museet of storing works unmounted on a folder-tray-box system. Some of the smaller works are housed flat, on corrugated acidfree boards with large polyester corners. Rolls are placed supported inside acidfree corrugated boxes. Navigating future requests from institutions and researchers had to be considered.



Preparatory works and ephemera are often, consciously and unconsciously, treated differently to 'finished' works of art. Yet the differences within a modern and contemporary museum setting are maybe not as pronounced. The collections tend to be more in flux with the unexpected happening more often and sudden transitory fame coming to unforeseen objects. Much of the 55,000 works of art on paper at Moderna Museet are housed unmounted and unframed. The majority will either not be exhibited at all or shown in a non-traditional way. Making collections available for the public and researchers involves thinking creatively and planning for alternatives such as projections and web based presentations. Having high quality resolution images from the beginning is imperative.



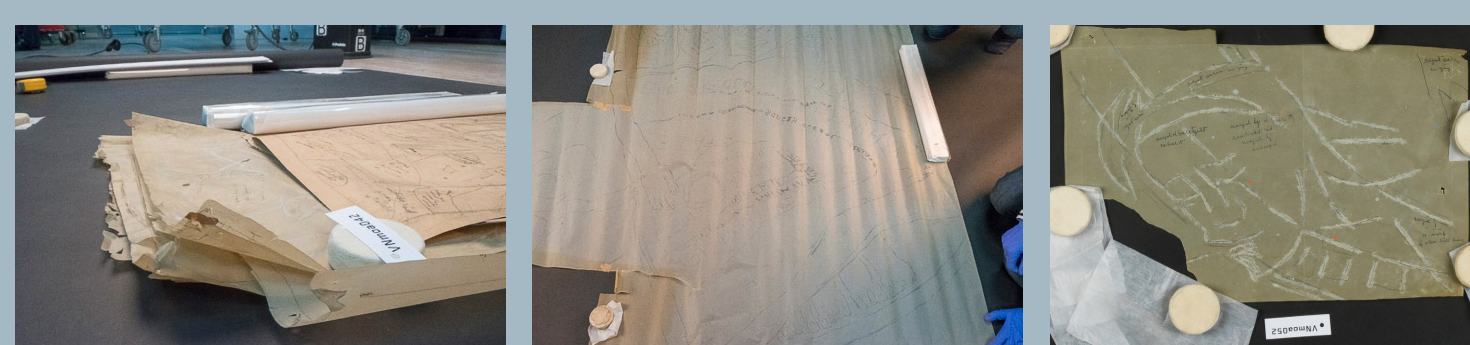
Further detail will be available on the conservation section of the museum website www.modernamuseet.se or contact a.norton@modernamuseet.se Photography by Prallan Allsten, Tora Hederus, Alison Norton. Thank you to the family of Vera Nilsson, Albin Dahlström and all involved in the project.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:
Att teckna ett liv: om Vera Nilssons konstnärskap, Yvonne Eriksson (Stockholm, 2010) *I förvillelensens tid: kring Vera Nilssons skissböcker* ed. Cecilia Widenheim (Stockholm, 2001)

Moderna Museet in Stockholm was offered in late 2016 a large donation of sketches and preparatory works to paintings and monumental works of the artist Vera Nilsson. The initial visit by the curator revealed a fantastic treasure trove. Sketches were rolled together, making estimates and viewing impossible. The material had originally been saved from the artist's studio after her death and before arrival at the museum was largely unseen.



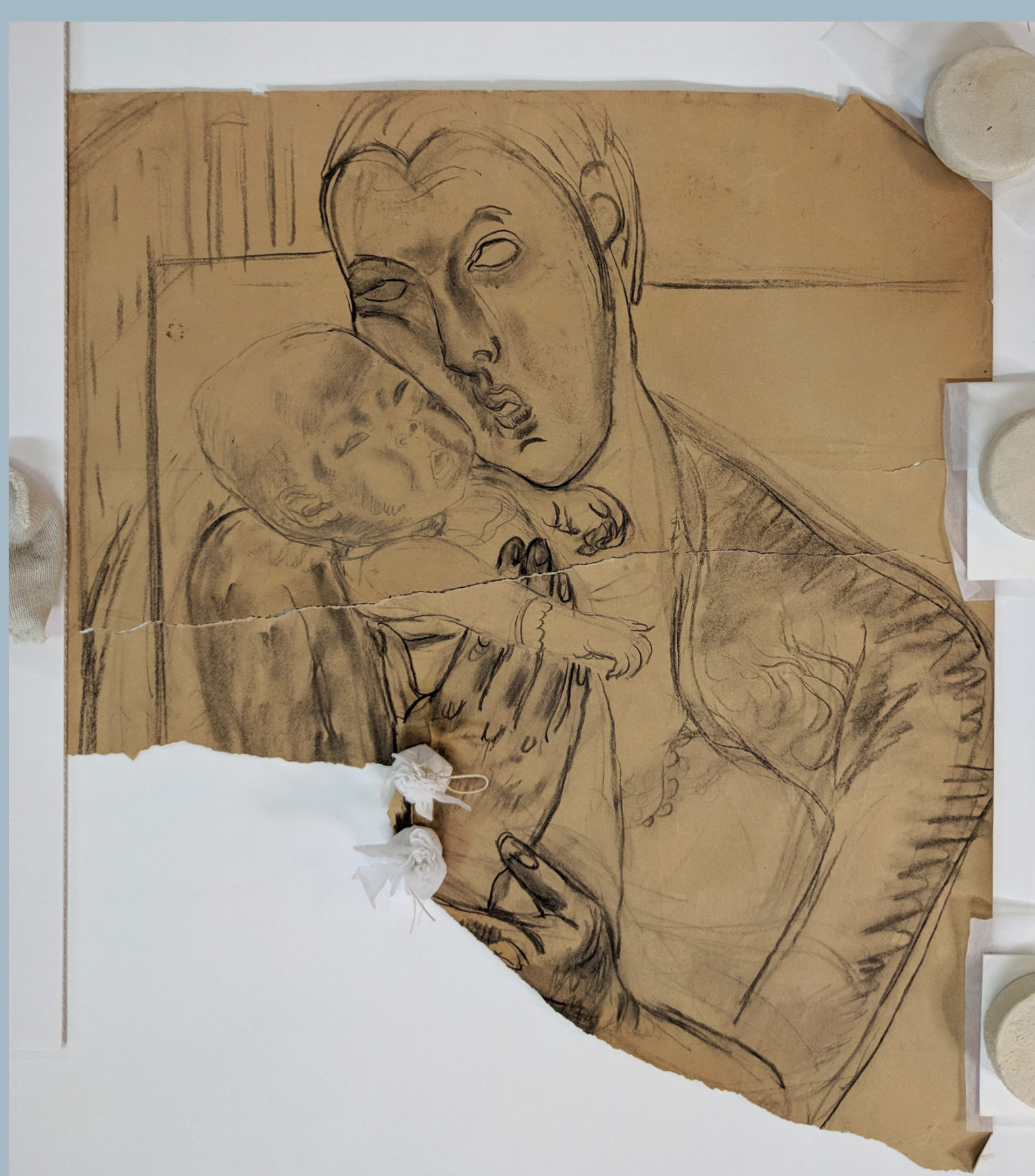
A number of the preparatory works were underdrawings and templates for frescoes. The plaster remains on the verso from use during transfer. Ensuring these works are kept as they are is essential.



With a few exceptions the material could not all be individually conserved or treated, and stored flat given available time and resources and the nature of the objects in the context of the museum collection. Individual tears are not repaired or losses infilled. The majority remain rolled, due to the difficulties in flattening transparent paper, and in this number but now in individual envelopes of acidfree paper and polyester. These allow unrolling in a protected manner and will prevent loss of material from inevitable breaks and fragmentation due to the continuing embrittlement of the paper. The use of Melinex allows viewing without handling the paper itself.



The donation is an incredibly rich source material and it is imperative that it is accessible for the both the public and researchers. Not only do the sketches and preparatory works reference paintings in the museums own collection, but also other collections and public works of art, for example in Stockholms Central Station, and are likely to be of interest to other institutions, such as Skissernas Museum (Museum of Artistic Process and Public Art) in Lund. Some are also likely to be the only remaining evidence of ideas, preoccupations and unfinished or lost works. In 1957 Vera Nilsson participated in the Sao Paulo Biennial after which six of her paintings were destroyed in a ship fire. The sketch below is believed to be part of the preparation for those works.



Art is the whisper of history, heard above the noise of time
Julian Barnes

Where lie the sketches, the preparatory drawings, are they the silent surrounding thoughts.

Drawings and sketches in charcoal, graphite, gouache, chalk and oil on transparent and tracing papers, wallpapers, brown wrapping paper were tied together with what had been at hand such as nylon tights and giftwrap string. The numbers, size and condition of the papers required preparation for initial investigation. Tears, missing sections, papers taped together and their extremely brittle nature and friable media added to the challenge.



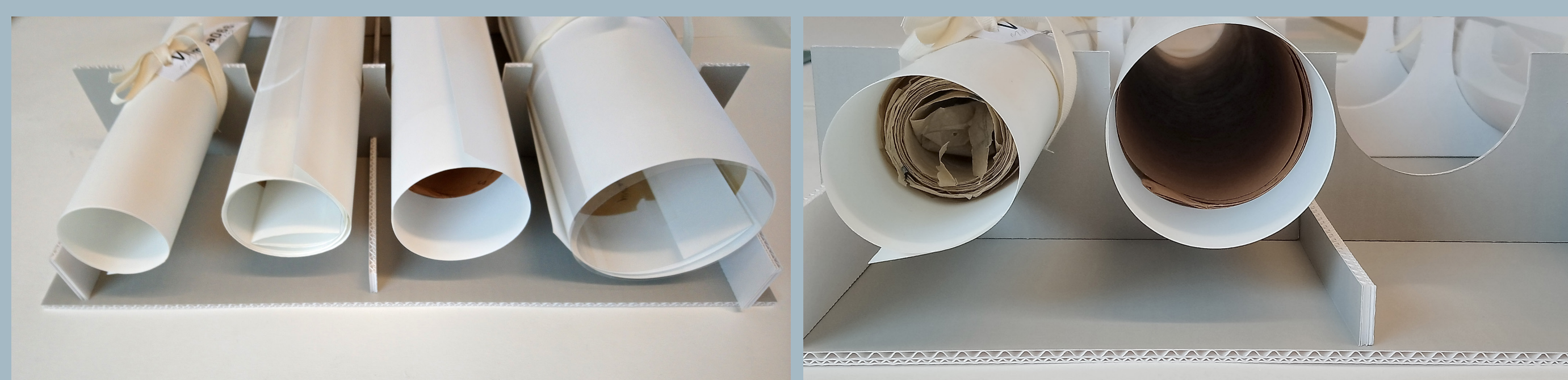
Preparatory work for the large fresco *Händer* (1953-54) in Djurgårdsskolan, Eskilstuna

Moderna Museet was already home to oil paintings and over 100 sketchbooks of Vera Nilsson, documenting her daily life and travels in Paris, Senegal, Öland and Spain. The entire donation was accessioned into the museum collection and each work given a new inventory number. A plan for their conservation and preservation was required which could be incorporated into the daily routine of the department with minimal extra resources.

It is only by drawing often, drawing everything, drawing incessantly, that one fine day you discover to your surprise that you have rendered something in its true character Camille Pissarro

Handling, Housing and the Future

Through the handling of the drawings it was realized that few apart from the artist had seen this material and due to their innate fragility and the limited expected useful life of the paper it is possible few will in the future. The nature of the works requires an approach which differs from more traditional single finished artworks. How could as much information as possible be preserved when the material has an inherent impermanence. Documentation of their condition and status at the point of accession is critical for future use, for example how the works were rolled together. Works which are adhered together are kept as such. Many of the preparatory drawings for frescoes have notations on colour schemes and pigment tests which were measured using a spectrophotometer. Further condition assessment will be performed in collaboration this autumn with the Riksarkivet (National Archives) using a SurveNIR, a near-infrared spectroscopic instrument which enables various chemical and mechanical properties of paper to be determined. Some drawings needed to be rephotographed and extra images of details were taken. The donation is very diverse, including a couple of oil paintings, drawings which will certainly be exhibited in the museum, some which reference works in other collections and the public domain and may well become long-term loans, and preliminary sketches of varying research interest. Decisions had to be taken to maintain a standard approach whilst preparing some for individual exhibition and others for transport or long-term storage with an in-built flexibility for presentation and an efficiency in storage. Future handling is to be minimized – many can not be unrolled without further damage.



The papers have often been tightly rolled for many years. Maintaining this curve and the 'memory of the paper' was often preferable to prevent new damage, breaks and loss. The tension in many of the transparent papers is such that unrolling risked breaking and new splits. Rolls are placed on individually cut supports of different sizes. Those that were folded were kept folded and re-rolled, and no change was made to those joined by staples or poor quality tapes.



Many of the works show the creative process behind paintings in the Moderna Museet collection, such as *Såpbubblor* (1927), above left, *Zambomba* and the portrait of *Astrid Holm* (1917), right.

This collection of preparatory works by Vera Nilsson gives a rare insight into the working practice of an artist that is seldom seen. Maintaining a sense of their original function and use, history and inherent nature has been paramount. Preparatory drawings help uncover an artists' preliminary thoughts for compositions giving insight into the creative process. Avoiding the aestheticisation of evidence underpins the role of the conservator in particular in the treatment of preparatory works, ephemeral art and objects not originally intended as finished artworks. Sketching was always an integral part of Vera Nilssons life and she always emphasized the process of working. This donation shows her entire practice – reworkings, enlargements, adjustments – and is an extremely valuable source material from a technical, material and art historical viewpoint.

Alison Norton, Ellen Cronholm, Tora Hederus, Annika Gunnarsson



...för det lukulliska A string tied around on of the rolls *For the delight* (trans.)

MODERNA MUSEET