The new, small painting of the Crucifixion that the Museum placed last spring among the early North European pictures is one of eighteen scattered scenes that once formed the wings of a large altarpiece in Bielefeld, in the province of Westphalia. The main panel, still in place in the Neustädter Marienkirche in Bielefeld, is nearly six feet high and more than nine feet across. The central scene, which occupies more than a third of the great horizontal panel, is a Glorification of the Virgin Mary. Majestic and crowned for her role of Queen of Heaven, Mary sits upon a wide, sculptured throne. Above its stone canopy five tilted angel heads look down protectingly on her and the small, nude Child who walks across her lap. Leaning upon the arms of the throne are Saints Peter and Paul at the left and at the right the two Saints John. On the ground at the Virgin’s feet are groups of saints, including Saint Barbara and Saint Catherine, who are clearly distinguished by the tower and the sword and wheel. Nor is there any mistaking the slim elegance of Saint George in the foreground, dressed in a fashionable costume, with one hand in a dégagé pose upon his knee.

At each side of the central picture, but painted on the same panel, are six small scenes depicting events in the lives of Christ and the Virgin. The now missing wings were also adorned originally with small pictures that formed with the subsidiary scenes of the central panel a long, continuous cycle illustrating the whole story of the Redemption of Man from the Fall to the Last Judgment.

In the year 1840, for some reason that has not been vouchsafed, the wings were detached from the ensemble to which they belonged and “presented” to a certain Geheimrat Krüger of the neighboring town of Minden. Krüger was the owner of many other fine paintings, mostly early German, and in 1854, after his death, the National Gallery in London, on the recommendation of Albert, the Prince Consort, bought the entire collection from his heirs. According to a history of the National Gallery some of these paintings were set aside for resale, some were sent to Edinburgh and Dublin, and the rest, including panels by the Master of Liesborn and others, were kept in London, where they form the greater part of the gallery’s representation of early German painting. Among the pictures sent to Christie’s in 1857 to be auctioned were the panels from the Bielefeld wings. An art dealer named Hermann bought them, and they were widely dispersed. Concerning several of them nothing more has been heard.

Within the last twelve years, however, with the aid of tracings preserved in Münster of thirteen of the panels, eleven pictures have been identified as missing members of the original ensemble. A Presentation of Christ in the Temple, which had been given to the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin in 1924 (no. 1934), was published in 1932 by Fritz Rolf as a picture from one of the wings. The following year Hans Kornfeld in an article in the Burlington Magazine republished this...
The Glorification of the Virgin and scenes from the lives of the Virgin and Christ, the central panel of the altarpiece in the Marienkirche at Bielefeld. Reproduced from Alfred Stange, “Deutsche Malerei der Gothik,” vol. iii, fig. 50
Berlin painting along with two in England that clearly belonged to the same work. One of them is a Christ before Pilate that was given to the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford in 1913, the other a Scourging of Christ that belongs to the church at Milton Ernest in Bedford. The Scourging appeared in 1924 at the Exhibition of British Primitives in Burlington House, where its relation to the Ashmolean picture was duly recognized and commented upon, although it remained for Mr. Kornfeld to relate them both to the German altarpiece. About 1939 eight more panels turned up in the trade in London, and four of them have come to New York. The subjects of these four are The Fall of Man, The Adoration of the Magi, The Flight into Egypt, and The Crucifixion—each of them recorded in a tracing at Münster.

The little Crucifixion that now provides the Museum with its earliest example of German painting is strangely gentle and reticent. Two completely opposed styles characterize the religious art and literature of Germany, and though it is not within the scope of this note to account for them, their divergence is interesting. The mountain trails of the Bavarian Tyrol and the countryside of other regions in the Catholic south of Germany used to be punctuated with wayside crucifixes. These crude shrines consisted of little more than a rough gable above a carved wooden figure of Christ on the cross, its original decoration of gruesomely realistic paint often mercifully mitigated or entirely chipped off by mountain blasts of snow and sleet. But no amount of weathering could obscure completely the intention of urging the passer-by to meditate on the sufferings and horrors of the Passion. This same intention to induce a violent emotional realization, a kind of devotional empathy, that pervades German religious representations and reaches its peak in the awful and marvelous central panel of Grünewald's altarpiece at Colmar, was formulated at the end of the thirteenth century by the German mystic Suso, who let the Crucified describe his sufferings in phrases that are texts for all these vivid images of pain: "I was thus left entirely helpless and forsaken, with running wounds, with weeping eyes, with extended arms, with the veins of my body on the rack, in the agony of death. . . ."

At the other pole from this grim realism, however, there runs another current, the tenderly mystical and sunny phantasy that sparkles in the paintings of the Cologne school and in more recent times warms and animates the religious poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke. It is chiefly in the valley of the Rhine that we find those blossoming gardens of Paradise in which the dainty and shyly sweet Virgin Mary, seated among prettily dressed and altogether beguiling saints, enjoys with them the fragrance of never-fading flowers. The school of Cologne, close to the borders of Burgundy and subject to the influences of the graceful and benign International style, produced in its painting a northern version of the santa conversazione. A slight variation on this theme is the scene as it occurs in the central panel of the Bielefeld altarpiece, where, for the casual holy companionship, there is substituted a Glorification of the Virgin. From her humble seat upon the ground in a garden of lilies and iris, as in a lovely little picture in the Frankfort Museum, Mary is raised to an impressive throne more meet for the Queen of Heaven, and her divine Child, who in the Frankfort Paradise sits at her feet and plucks the strings of a harp, is lifted to her lap. Here in this Glorification, as in the Paradise, the saints and angels cluster affectionately about her, but the company of the elect enjoys, instead of a carpet of grass and flowers, a very courtly one of rich brocade.

The Glorification in Bielefeld, indeed, bears certain general resemblances to similar works of the school of Cologne. In composition, especially in the placing of Saints Peter and Paul and the two Saints John at the sides of the throne, it is very like a painting in the Johnson collection (formerly in the Ruhl and Felix collections) which is there ascribed to the famous but uncertain personality called "Meister Wilhelm" of Cologne. In style, however, the Bielefeld altarpiece seems to be a
The Crucifixion, by a Westphalian artist of the early XV century. This is one of a series of panels that once formed the wings of the Bielefeld altarpiece.
product of the neighboring school of Westphalia. Max Friedländer has, in fact, asserted that it is a work of the great early master of the Westphalian school, Conrad von Soest. Meister Conrad's only certain work is the large, signed altarpiece of the Crucifixion at Niederwildungen, and with this work as a basis of estimate for his style it would seem that some other—perhaps slightly older, in any case, more provincial—painter must be regarded as the author of the Bielefeld picture. This artist prefers much stockier forms than those of Meister Conrad, and although in the Crucifixion altarpiece in Dortmund (which is probably a work of the end of our painter's career) he has achieved a modish elongation of the figures and has acquired much more competence and clarity in design, nowhere in his work, early or late, does he show the finesse and knowing grace of Meister Conrad.

The Bielefeld altarpiece is reported by a nineteenth-century eyewitness to have borne on its frame the date 1400. Writers of the nineteenth century were far freer of chauvinistic and political prejudice than those of the twentieth, and there is really nothing in the painting itself to lead us to mistrust the reliability of this early date. The scheme of a large, complex altarpiece with wings composed of small scenes had already been formulated in 1379 by Meister Bertram of Hamburg. Indeed, although our painter shows certain mannerisms, chiefly in the gestures of the long-fingered hands, that are also to be found in the works of Meister Conrad and his close followers in Westphalia, he has much more in common with the earlier tradition of Meister Bertram. There is the same pervading effect of sincerity and old-fashioned seriousness in the clumsy, slightly rustic drama of the little scenes.

Our Crucifixion shows four figures against a barren gold ground. The cross is set in jagged slate blue rocks. On one side mourns the beloved disciple John, who with his left hand holds the book of the fourth Gospel and with his right, in a gesture of touching affectation, clutches his robe to his throat. Opposite him is the mourning Virgin and another woman whom we should expect to be the Magdalen, but she wears no halo and carries no vase of ointment, and she has none of the beauty of face or form that customarily distinguishes the repentant worldling. The drapery folds are simple and the straight fall of the Virgin's cloak from head to hem is a characteristic met in many of the other scenes.

The picture is remarkable chiefly for its deliciously pale and liquid, one might say watered color. There is little modeling and what there is, is accomplished by opaque white lights in the predominantly blue and green scheme. Saint John's wavy curls are red gold, and his mantle of green lined with buff is worn over an underdress shading from palest rose to ripe watermelon pink. The delightful silver-armored Saint George in the central panel also has red-gold hair.

With its delectable color, its gentleness, and its earnest and rather moving awkwardness, our fragment of the Bielefeld altarpiece contributes much to the Museum's collection of German paintings.

Acc. no. 43.161. Tempera and gold on wood. H. 23½, w. 17 inches. Rogers Fund, 1943.