In this tutorial I will explain how to convert a color photograph to a B&W one with color restored to selective areas. With the right subject this can give really striking results, as you can see for yourself. This technique is elsewhere referred to sometimes as "hand coloring" :-)

The basic technique is to duplicate the color photograph, convert the duplicate to B&W, and paste it as a new layer on top of the color image. Add an opaque layer mask and then selectively paint transparency into the upper mask, exposing the color photograph underneath.

Giving credit where credit is due: I did not come up with this method. I adapted it for GIMP from a reader comment I saw in a "hand-coloring" tutorial on photo.net (great web site by the way, I recommend it).
The Procedure

Here is the original example image, loaded into GIMP.
Step 1

Load the image provided.
Step 2

Duplicate the layer by clicking on the paper to the left of the anchor. Rename it B&W. Make that layer black & white by selecting Colors \(\rightarrow\) Desaturate.

Step 3

Add a transparency layer Layers \(\rightarrow\) Transparency \(\rightarrow\) Add Alpha Channel. Then use the eraser to erase the baby hand on the B&W layer.
Step 4

When you get to the edges of the colored part, zoom in to make life easier. Use the circle fuzzy brush for the edges of the hand.

At the very boundaries of the colored image I typically zoom in to 300% or so. Switch to a small, feathered brush and very carefully paint the edges. If you only paint a little at a time it makes it much easier to use GIMP’s excellent undo feature if you accidentally stray outside the boundary. If for some reason you can’t undo, don’t worry: just switch to white paint and paint opacity back over your mistake to repair the mask.
Final Step

When you're all done, go over the colored part carefully to see if there are any gray (opaque) specks that you missed. Then zoom out and have a look. Voila!
Tips

• For this kind of fine paint work, a pen tablet like this Wacom one is very useful. For photo retouching you don't need any bigger than a 4x5 model.
• In this example I restored the original color from the color image, but there is no reason that you couldn't paint other colors onto the second layer. Just make sure that the image is selected and not the layer mask in the upper layer of the Layers dialog (click on either the image icon or the mask icon to select the one you want to work on).
• Try blurring the lower color layer, or running one of the interesting "artistic" filters on it (pastels, oil painting, etc). You probably want to do this before you create the B&W copy.
Other Examples
Further Reading

- a "hand-coloring" tutorial on photo.net