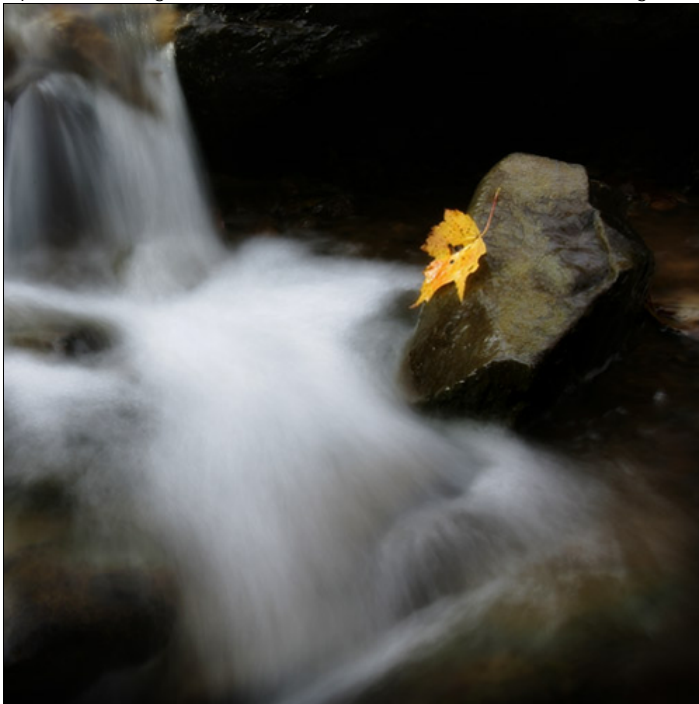# Color in Black and White

Some people asked me about my approach of getting color elements in black and white images. So in this article I am going to describe several approaches to do this and show the benefits and drawbacks of those:

- History Brush
- Layer Masking
- Softlight Mode

History Brush

This is the very basic approach, but less manageable as others. Here all you need is to create a black and white image and restore the color for selected elements of this image. Once you've restored color, you cannot change any parameters of it (i.e. shape, hue, etc.). But it is very easy to do.

1. Open an image (make sure that the mode [menu Image, Mode] is in RGB)

2. Switch the mode to Grayscale – menu Image, Mode, Grayscale

3. Now you have you black and white image

4. Switch back to RGB mode (menu Image, Mode, RGB). Nothing will change but you will be able to work with color.

5. Select "History Brush" in the tool bar – " "

6. Zoom in on the object you want to restore color for. In my case it is the leaf.

7. Use the history brush to return color to the object. You may want to change the opacity of the brush to better control how the color should be restored.
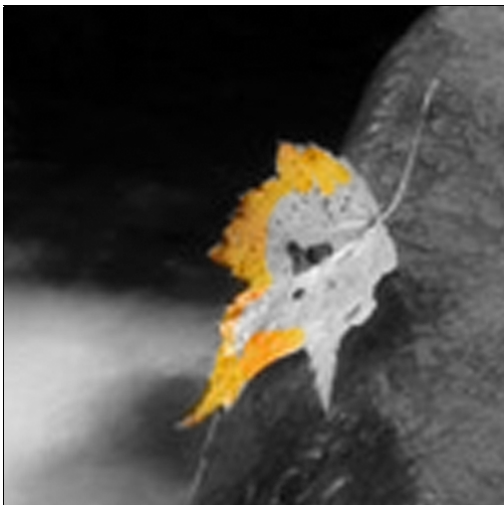
8. And when you finished you have a black and white image with and colored element(s)

Note: If since the time you opened the image made changes to the image, such as size, mode, canvas size and similar one, Photoshop may not allow you to restore color. To make it happen you have to set the state of the image from which you are restoring color from. Initially the image "History" will look like below
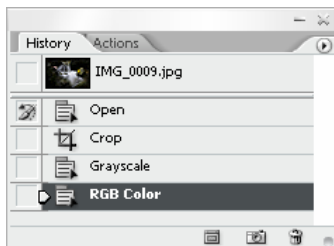

Notice that in front of first state (with label "Open") you see a history brush icon. It means that Photoshop would try to restore color from the state when the image was just opened, but the size of the image changed. So to continue, you have to click on the left of the "Crop" state and set the history brush icon against that state as shown below
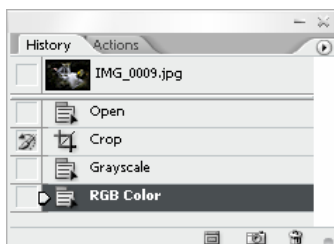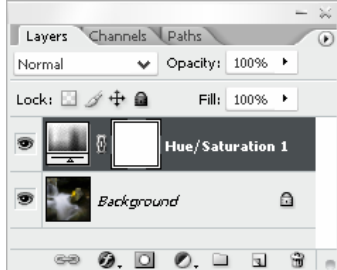

Layer Masking

This approach gives you somewhat more flexibility to change what you have done and apply different type of black-n-white conversion. It means that after you restored the color for an element, you may change the parameters of the color element or the rest white and black area (such as shape, hue, tones, etc.). So here how it goes:

1. Open the image

2. Create another layer with your black and white image. In my simplistic case I create a new adjustment Hue/Saturation layer (menu Layer, New Adjustment Layer, Hue/Saturation) and change the saturation to 0:
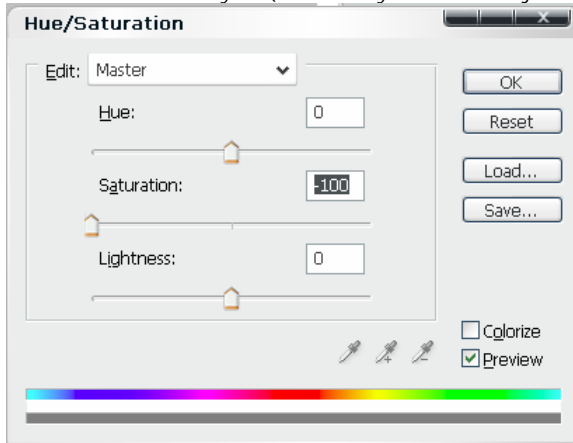

3. So my Layer Panel looks like this:

    Note: You may have just the same image atop but in black and white (if you used different approach to create a black and white image). In such case you have to create a layer mask – click " [□] " at the bottom of the Layer Panel (while your BW image layer is selected)

4. Now select Brush tool in the tool bar and use black ink to paint on the layer mask to let the color through. My layer mask looks like that:
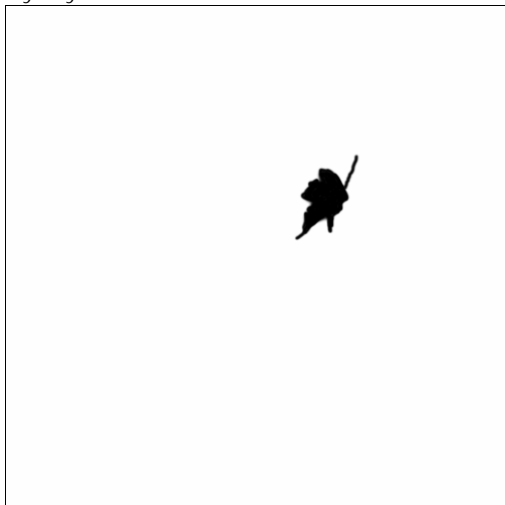
5. And when you are finished, your black and white image has a colored element

At this point you can easily change the shape and opacity (intensity) of the color element – use the layer mask, or change the hue, contrast and else by applying those adjustments to the background layer. Though I would

recommend to create a copy of the background layer beneath the black and white layer and then apply the adjustment to this newly created layer. In this case you could easily return to original image at any point in time.
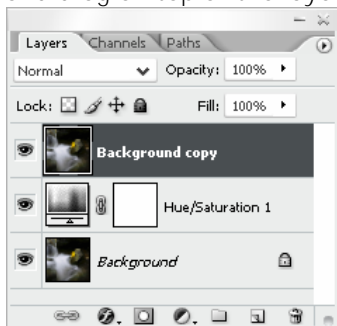
Softlight Mode

This is a more creative technique; you can better control the color of the element and make it look like it is hand painted. The idea here is to apply the color to the black and white image via a blending mode "Softlight", though you can use other modes, such as Overlay, Hardlight, Pinlight and Multiply, to give different looks.

1. We will start with the step #3 of the previous section – when we created a layer with a black and white image atop of the background layer. In my case I have the following layer panel:
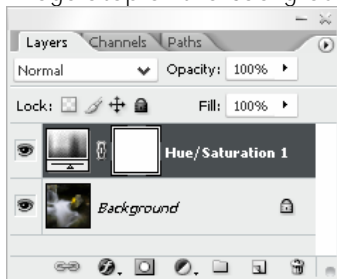
2. My next step would be to duplicate the background layer (click on the background layer and press Ctrl-J) and drag on top of the layer stack:

3. It seems nothing changed – the color image again atop of the stack. But now we change the blending mode of the top layer to Softlight:
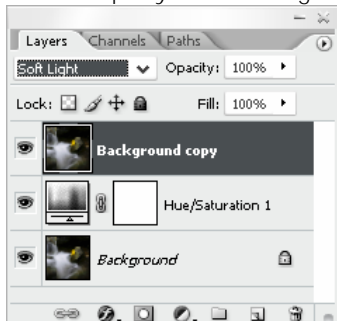
**Note**: The image doesn't look quite color or black and white anymore. But it is an intermediate step.

4. First we create a black layer mask (kind of return to the pure black and white image – prevent anything to change the colors of the image). To do so, while the top layer is selected just hold Alt key and click on the mask icon " " at the bottom of the Layer Panel.
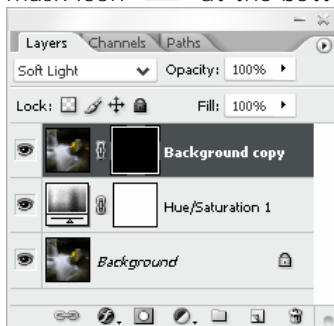
5. Now image is black and white once more time. So let's paint the layer mask with white brush to reveal the color for the leaf (or whatever element you are working on)
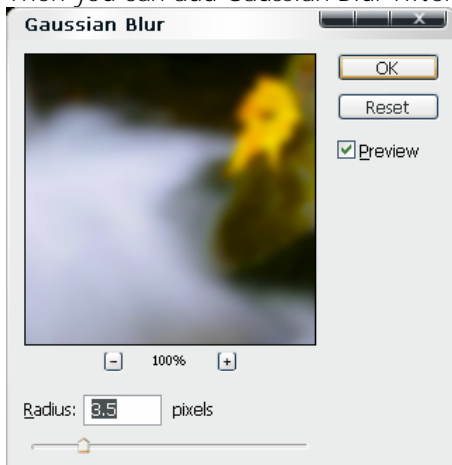

6. The color is somewhat dim, so I usually increase saturation of the layer (the top one) - select the image icon in click Ctrl-U:
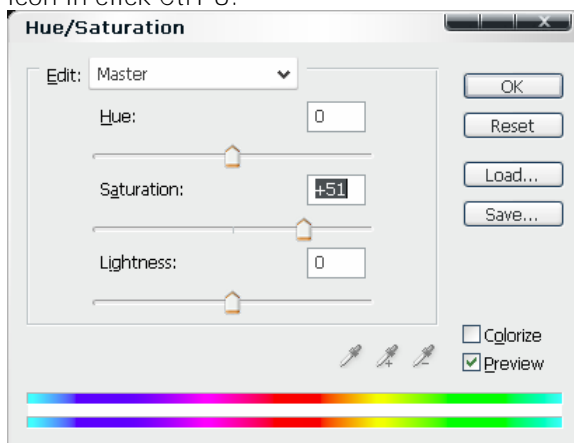

7. We made the color almost the same as it was on the original photograph (in terms of intensity).

8. Then you can add Gaussian Blur filter (menu Filters, Blur, Gaussian Blur):

Note: This effect better to be applied to a large object or to the whole photograph (without the layer mask). It adds somewhat hand painting effect. And the Radius depends on the size of the image (the smaller the size, the smaller the radius) and on the desired result – just play with it and see what you get.

9. This Blur effect smudges the colors, so I add additional contrast with Curves – press Ctrl-M:
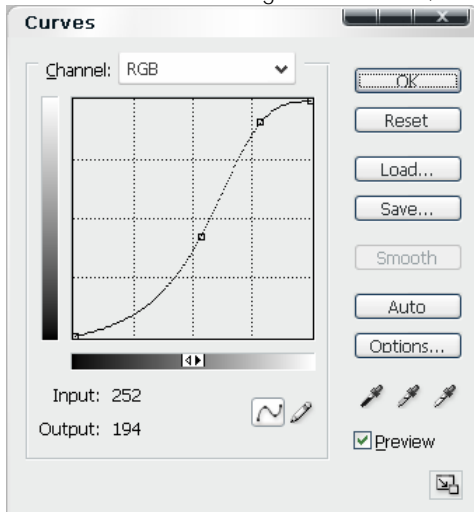
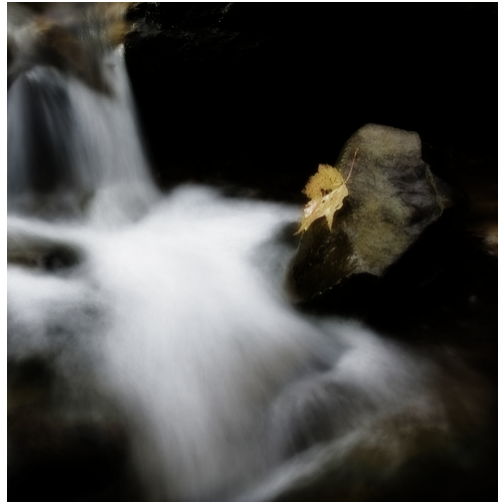10. This is pretty much it. I got the following image:
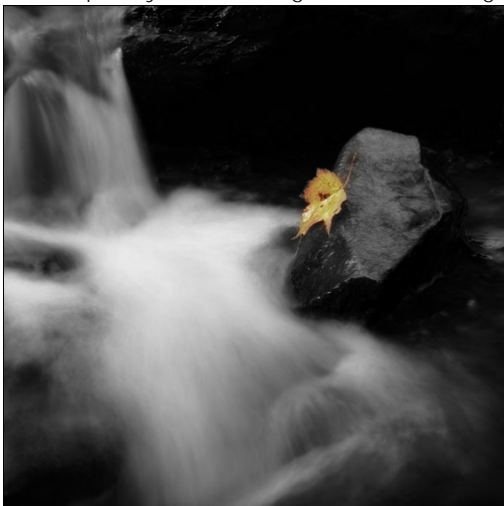
As it seen here, the changes in color (compared with the previous approach) are very subtle and hard to notice. But if you disable the Layer Mask (hold Shift key and click on the layer mask icon), the whole image has a completely different look:

With the curves: *Without the curves:*

Play with the effects to see what suits you better. You may even change the blending mode to "Color", which would completely return your image to the look of the original color image, and see how Gaussian Blur affects the look.

Want something extra? Here is an idea – change the color balance (Ctrl-B) of the black and white layer (in the middle of the stack).