A few years ago, a middle school student walked into the art classroom at the start of the school year and stated loud and clear: “ I hate art. It’s useless. That’s what my dad says.”

Little did she know that she had a hidden creative streak. She soon became engrossed in the Skills Lessons and by the end of the quarter produced several astounding watercolors that I entered in the Student Art Competition at the Arizona State Fair. If my memory serves me well, at least one of her her pieces won a ribbon. She consequently declared that she planned to grow up and become an art teacher. Even more amazing, her grades started improving across the board, in all other subjects.

Among parents from Asian backgrounds, there is a tendency to ignore the fine arts and stress on math and science. As a result, we are producing young adults who are like a dish with rice and meat, but no seasoning, no taste, no flavor, and served without side dishes or desserts.

The blame for this attitude can partially be laid at the door of the lack of good art educators. The majority of art classes anywhere in the world usually consist of what I call “preschool paper plate projects”. A typical preschool “art” class: the teacher distributes paper plates to 20 children seated around pretty low tables. She then asks them to pick up two circles each from the center plate. She demonstrates how to glue them so they would look like two eyes. She then proceeds to move around the room, correcting all students’ work. She then tells the children to pick up a triangle from the plate of triangles (that she spent all night cutting), and glue it just so under the eyes to form the nose. She then runs around the room correcting all 20 mistakes. She then proceeds to do the same for the half-circle mouth, and the strands of yarn for the hair. She then collapses from exhaustion, having made 20 faces. When the children are picked up by their parents, they are given their masterpieces to show their parents. Parents are astounded by their child’s genius, go home and look for the art piece to stick on the fridge. Ah, there it is, on the floor of the car, where it lies abandoned by the child artist. Why? Because s/he is not proud of it. S/he knows full well it was the teacher’s work. And if the parents were to ask him/her to make another face, s/he would not be able to make one.

Children are in fact extremely creative at an early age, before well-meaning art teachers crush that fountain into conformist attitudes. To tap into this creativity and channel it into exhibitable works of art, what is a teacher to do? The answer is simple: give them tools.

What I call “tools” in the production of an art piece are of two types: First, teach the child the properties of the medium used. Second, teach the child various time-honored methods and design tips. Then, watch them fly.

Watercolor is the best example. Most teachers will ask a child to paint “a house”, “a person”, or “a flower” with no instruction whatsoever regarding “HOW” to use watercolor. So, as a result, most children dip their brush in water, then swirl them on a cake of red or blue or yellow, then use this colored brush to *draw* shapes as if they were using a crayon. Although this method does produce something, it is a waste of paint. The same result could have been achieved using crayons or markers. Watercolor is a paint, and can be used to produce myriads of different textures and colors. It can be allowed to flow freely and guide the artist into new shapes and forms.

Design is another “tool” often not given to children. For example, most children will draw a house at the bottom of a huge paper, add trees, flowers, grass and so on, all tiny and neat, sitting on the bottom of the paper. Maybe then, she will add a sun and clouds at the top of the paper since this is where she thinks the sky is. The great majority of the surface of the paper will remain empty. One simple design tip is to tell the child to “fill the paper”. Make the house BIG, fill up the space!

These seem very logical and easy tips, but they are often neglected. It is amazing how children bloom when given these simple basic instructions.