

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & James Doyle

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by James Doyle, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I ask him: Who was keeping it real in Mesoamerica? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness. This is such an exciting episode. Our guest is incredible. The subject is amazing. Nothing new there on either front. Welcome James Doyle, who is an archeologist specializing in ancient Mayan art and architecture. He is currently the assistant curator for Art of the Ancient Americas at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. James, welcome.

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:00:42] Thank you so much, Jonathan, for having me.

**JVN** [00:00:44] Yes. Ok, so, you know, I don't want you to sprain your neck, but you might when I ask my first few questions, because we're not in 101, we're in, like, Mesoamerican, like, preschool. What are we talking about when we say Mesoamerican societies? Like, where are we? What are we talking about? Where in the world is it?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:01:09] So, where are we: we are thinking about what was going on in basically north, central, and south America before European colonization. So Mesoamerica is a term that was coined to describe the cultural area that basically spreads between, about, central Mexico and northern Honduras and El Salvador. So it's, it's a term, it's more of a cultural term than a geographic term. So we're looking at the societies that flourished in a couple of 1,000 years in what is now central Mexico into Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. And the uniting cultural traits that we're thinking about are the use of a numeral system. So they were writing numbers using bars and dots. The dots are one, the bars are five. It's pretty simple. But that was spread throughout the region.

And we also have hieroglyphic writing. So just like in ancient Egypt, in other parts of the ancient world, we have people recording their histories and their narratives about life in writing; that is, speech recorded in hieroglyphs. And we also have sort of ceremonies, like the ball game. So this is another thing that unites Mesoamerica as this region that we think about because the cultures there had similar types of architecture, including a ball court. And, of course, rubber balls were invented in Mesoamerica, so you're welcome, world, for that. And the ball game was played in this area. So, it was sort of a way, Mesoamerica is this conceptual umbrella to think about what united the peoples, the ancestral Indigenous peoples of Mexico and Central America for really starting around 2000 BC to essentially the present, of course, because we have a lot of living traditions today.

**JVN** [00:03:02] They still exist now, there are thriving Mesoamerican cultures that exist, like, contemporarily, but they started about 2000 BC; is that correct, what I'm hearing you say?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:03:12] Yeah so that's, yeah, around 2000 BC what we see is people coming together to build things together. And that's, as an archeologist, that's what we can measure, right. So people building community spaces and larger buildings for gatherings, that really happens in the second millennium BC. And really the, the, the things that people may have heard of as far as large pyramids, architecture, civilizations, the sort of peak of construction and textual production was about, I would say, seven or 800 AD, and in parts of Mesoamerica. But, of course, when the Spanish arrived to Mexico in the early 16th century, there were large empires and societies all throughout this region. So it's, it's really what I like about thinking about Mesoamerica is this total parallel story of art and architecture and society and community that was, you know, completely separate from the rest of the world and doing their own thing but united, like I said, by these threads, these cultural threads that make a sort of Mesoamerican identity, in a way.

**JVN** [00:04:27] Ah, that is amazing. So we learned from Professor Jue Guo about, like, Early China that, like, obviously I struggle with time. So like, what's ancient and then what's, like, pre, what are, like, those definitions again?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:04:43] Yeah. So we say ancient Americas more broadly, that's generally anything before colonization. And what, what we look at with Mesoamerica between about, you know, one and a 1000, it has been known to researchers as the Classic period because it was sort of compared to classical Mediterranean societies and empires, because you see similar forms of organization of peoples, even though, like I said, it's totally parallel and separate, there are these analogies that can be drawn with some of the societies from the ancient world that people may be more familiar with.

**JVN** [00:05:25] So just to do, like, a teeny tiny, like, overall overview, and then we are going to hone in on that art, architecture, society and what, like, zero to 1,000 was like, but I literally didn't understand so much of this until, like, right now. So I'm just trying to wrap my non-binary brain around it. So 2000 BC, people start to come together in this Mesoamerican area. We start to build things. It really, like, all out building, building, building around 7 to 800 AD or, like, Common Era, yes. So, and then, and, no one comes there from Europe until the 1500s. For someone from zero to 1000, like, AD or Common Era or whatever, to think that someday this bustling, you know, building city with languages and stuff would ever be, like, massively wiped out wouldn't be something that a lot of those people would have probably saw coming, right?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:06:22] Yeah, it's an interesting question. And, you know, what's, what's fascinating is that with recent advances in archeology, we're able to see that there were these arcs before that had nothing to do with European colonization. So, for example, the city of Teotihuacan, which is a large gridded city with massive pyramids outside of Mexico City today, it, it really was built and it was around, let's say, around the 400s, it was probably one of the largest cities in the world. But by, say, 700 AD it was pretty much abandoned. So we do see that there were these cycles of sort of explosive growth, but then people migrated away. People, you know, for some reason, whatever governance had brought them together was no longer working and people migrated to other parts of Mesoamerica. So even before European colonization, there were very interesting sort of rise and fall cycles for different groups in Mesoamerica.

**JVN** [00:07:27] That's fascinating. So let's start off at one, because that's a good number, so it's 1 AD. We are in Mesoamerica. Are there, like, several, like, Game of Thrones-y, like, you know, competing factions to, like, build the most gorgeous pyramid? Is everyone kind of friends? Like, who are the players? What's the deal, like, in that time?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:07:55] Definitely. We, we see a lot of different types of competing city states. So if you think about, in central Mexico, we have something going on that's much more of an urban feel, there's, it's kind of, it's a central place. But, for example, in the southern part of Mexico, in Oaxaca, we have several different competing city states around 1 AD. And so they're not, there's not really one place that becomes the dominant sort of cool place you want to live. And similarly in the Maya region, which is today sort of the most southern parts of Mexico and Guatemala and Belize, we have royal courts coalescing around these dynasties. I mean, it's very, it's very Game of Thrones because these, these are people claiming divine connections and they are claiming parts of the landscape and claiming sort of subjects really. And they are sort of building up these narratives of why you should believe what they say, right.

And then so, so we see different ways that people were coming together in Mesoamerica. And that's what I love about it, is thinking about there's not one way to look at societies in the Americas because there's-, there was always such a diversity. And, you know, you think about Maya kings and queens, they would have perhaps compared themselves to somebody in Oaxaca, but if they look over at Teotihuacan and it was more of, perhaps it was more of a collective form of governance, you have, like, a council of important families. So there really is kind of these stories we can tease out from the archeological evidence that tell us different things about how people behaved, right. And how, what, what their hopes and dreams were as far as taking over things or really just staking out their claims on the landscape, right.

**JVN** [00:10:01] So Teotihuacan and then Maya, and then what's Veracruz?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:10:08] So the Gulf Coast of Mexico, there is, again, a great diversity of societies there that sort of didn't really fit into these models that we know. And so we have similar traits like the ball game and things going on but we also see they're developing their own art styles. They're developing their own architecture that is royal and dynastic, but in different ways than we see in other places.

**JVN** [00:10:35] Ok, so that's the Veracruz area, and then Maya is kind of, like, more south of Mexico. It's, like, Belize, Guatemala, like, southern Mexico.

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:10:43] Mhmm yeah. And Teotihuacan is right outside, outside of Mexico City, right now.

**JVN** [00:10:49] Ok. And then really, we're all kind of, like, doing different things simultaneously in different areas, and at this time, like, at one, like, isn't that, like there's other stuff going on all over, which is kind of what you had just said, but this is all kind of like existing in a bubble for this time because it's not dealing with, like, outside influences, which is really cool. But, like, so, like, Rome is kind of going on in Europe, right?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:11:17] Yeah, you have, like, Rome, you have the Han dynasty, you have Ptolemaic Egypt. And at the same time you have a similar diversity of societies that have developed in the bubble, as you've said, in isolation.

**JVN** [00:11:32] Ah, I can't, I'm obsessed. And then do we call their written language hieroglyphics or do they have, like, a cute, like, Mesoamerican-specific name for their written language?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:11:42] Well, we yeah, we call them hieroglyphics, and that basically means that you're using pictures for words. And so that's kind of a larger term. We have different writing systems, but they are united in the numbers that I mentioned before. So people across Mesoamerica counted dates in the same way.

**JVN** [00:11:59] That is so cool. I guess I always thought the hieroglyphics was something that, like, Egyptologists coined. But really it's, like, I was wrong and it really just means using pictures for words. Fascinating. So can you tell me a little bit more about, like, the Game of Thrones-y people going on like around one, and then, like, like, who came out on top? Like, who was, like, it, you know, at 200, like, "Fuck off fuckers, like, we won and no one even knows who you are anymore because we took the crown," like, "We are Mesomerica's next top royal family."

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:12:32] It's a great question. And really there's this long history of interaction between different competing groups that, for example, so among the Maya kingdoms, that's where we have the most information because we have the most text, we have the most hieroglyphic record, right. And you can think about it in a way that's a little bit of propaganda, right. You have here I am, I'm this queen, I actually know her name, Lady Wak Chan Ajaw, the, like we can read her name. So here I am commissioning a sculpture of myself, standing on top of a captive from one of my rival kingdoms that I've already defeated and I'm telling you about that in the text. So we have that type of drama going on in the Maya kingdoms themselves.

So you have marriage alliances, you have warfare, you have diplomatic visits, you have all the things that we think of in these dynastic, really monarchs right. I mean, that's, that's what they're claiming. They're claiming a divine status. And then, so if we think about the interaction within the Maya kingdoms, that's one thing. But then, for example, Teotihuacan, many miles away, it was such an important city that there is a Maya neighborhood, there's a Veracruz neighborhood at Teotihuacan. So it is really, like, the Manhattan of its time. It's drawing people from all over Mesoamerica because they want to be a part of that. And so then you have well, at some point it looks like the people at Teotihuacan and actually this is a very specific year, 378 AD, Common Era.

It seems that people from Teotihuacan march into the Maya area, which they're recording on their monuments. This guy arrived in this day and they, they are having an effect on the politics. They replace a king at a place called Tikal, Guatemala. So somebody from Teotihuacan comes in and basically acts as the king at Tikal and puts a new person on the throne. So it's, it's really, we have this great rich history. We don't really know. I mean, that's, there's new archeology going on all the time in these areas to try and get more of that story, because we, sometimes we only have the texts and what they record. So it's important to back that up with some of the physical evidence from archeology looking at, you know, are there, is there evidence that people, for example, used, brought their own pottery with them or if they're, they're making their own pottery in the way of the local people? So teasing out these stories of conflict and migration and, and interaction are one of the big priorities of archeology in Mesoamerica these days.

**JVN** [00:15:15] So the most major, like, queen at a time in, like, the Maya region, like, she wouldn't necessarily be, like, running Teotihuacan, but maybe she would have, like, a representative up in the neighborhood up there or whatever?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:15:31] Yeah, I think that that's a fair hypothesis because Teotihuacan it's, is a fascinating place because we don't have, we have some hieroglyphs, but they're

not deciphered yet. And so we get a sense that there is a, an intense top-down leadership of the government there. But we don't know if it was one person, for example, like, was there a king of Teotihuacan; there's not that evidence. So it looks like maybe these are important families kind of ruling together or, but I think, you know, people are leaning towards more there might have been one central person at Teotihuacan, but like you said, the people in the Maya area, they weren't subjects of Teotihuacan, they would be interacting and trading and they would send emissaries or diplomats, just like you would think of in other places. So they would, they want, they want in on the action, but it's not necessarily a top-down sort of domination type of relationship.

**JVN** [00:16:28] So in 378, was it that, like, someone in Teot-, like, I'm still trying to wrap my head around that story. So basically, like there is a different city, which was called... Tikal? Tikal. And, so what happened again?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:16:46] So at Tikal, they, the people record in the text that somebody from Teotihuacan came to the center of Tikal, and on that day that he arrived the current king died. So the assumption is that there was something sinister going on. And there was a new king that was probably related to this Teotihuacan person put on the throne there. So it really was about exerting this outside political control over a place that was very far away. And there are several possibilities, like maybe Tikal was getting too grand, you know, and maybe they were, in the eyes of these Teotihuacan people, they needed to be sort of brought under some sort of control. These are the types of arguments that people are trying to address with archeology these days, both at Tikal and at Teotihuacan. So there are great Mexican and Guatemalan projects right now working on these questions.

**JVN** [00:17:48] So it's, like, as far as governments of this era, it's, like, there was some, you know, more dynasty, some were more, like, tribal, we don't exactly know everything. But what were some of the, like, economic and, like, cultural differences between these Mesoamerican areas?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:18:03] Great question. We, we know that there were a lot of different languages spoken. So you can imagine that it was a very multilingual place and you would have had people that traded over long distances that probably spoke many languages. And so if we think about what are they trading, right. So we, we know that they're trading things like obsidian. So the volcanic glass, you would actually need that at a very basic level to cut things because we don't have metal knives. We're, we're, we're using obsidian that come from volcanic sources to create blades. They're very, very sharp, sort of small blades, but you're, that's what you're using to cut in addition to other stone tools. Jade is another thing that was very important as a commodity in ancient Mesoamerica. And so you may be more familiar with jades from, say, East Asia or other places in the ancient world.

**JVN** [00:19:56] I'm familiar with jade rolling, just, you know, rolling it on my face.

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:19:02] Well, you should get some Mesoamerican jade 'cause that's, that's high quality. There's a source in Guatemala for jadeite, which is the really green, beautiful stone, and it was valued early on as a luxury good. It really is something that is, that was created and they would make regalia out of it, pendants and beads. And the blue-green color was important too, because it's not just a precious, valuable material, it's about the symbolism too, because jade for the ancient Mesoamericans peoples was about agricultural fertility. It's the blue-green color of water. So it's about that type of connection to the landscape.

And then you, wearing that, are claiming that connection to maize, for example, because the jade sprouts are the blue-green sprouts coming out of the corn. So there, there are these layers of metaphors for what they're trading around as far as jade. And we just see feathers as well, that, these are the kind of ephemeral things that we only get glimpses of but we have to, we know that people were trading tropical bird feathers over long distances as, as commodities, because if you want, if you want a fancy headdress with quetzal feathers or a macaw feathers, they don't live near Teotihuacan. So you need to get, you need to get on that so you can get your feathers imported. And we also know that marine shell, equally, was traded over long distances. So, you know the beautiful sort of, like, corally-colored Spondylus shell, that's this orangey, deep red.

That was another very important material for peoples in Mesoamerica to make into things that they would wear and project that access to wealth and project the connections and how important you were being able to have those, those raw materials and make them into things. So we also probably think they were trading chocolate. So you can only grow cacao in certain areas because of the way the trees behave. But it was a very important ritual drink. And so the cacao beans were being traded over long distances so that the, those are all really uniting peoples in Mesoamerica, because they're all these valuable materials for different societies, which I think I like to think of it as kind of a translingual way of connecting the peoples. Because if you, say you're the, you're the king of Teotihuacan, you show up in the Maya area, you're wearing jade, you're wearing shell, so I, as somebody who lives in Tikal knows, "That's an important person," right. So it's, it's a way of projecting your importance across cultures really in Mesoamerica.

**JVN** [00:21:45] I think one thing that has really stuck with me from what Jue Guo told me is, like, you know, often history is written by the winners. And so we don't know a lot of times in, like, ancient and, like, early times like, well, what was it like if you were just like an

everyday person? What if you weren't a king or queen? What if you couldn't afford the shells? What if you didn't have obsidian in your backyard?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:22:03] What are the sort of regular people doing, right. If you're not in one of these dynasties, if you're not in one of these, sort of what we can say is, like, a wealthy or a higher status household, what are you doing? And what's interesting is the basic, so if you imagine a very basic maize farm in 400 AD in the Maya area, you would have a house and it was, it was organized in a way that was not dissimilar to the palace. So you have the foundational concepts, for example, of the four directions and the center, because the sort of layout of the universe for a Maya person that's living in a small, you know, wooden structure is the same that we see in the monumental architecture. So it's, the kings and queens are really co-opting these ideas and building them at a monumental scale but there was that basic connection with the people who were just farmers, just everyday farmers.

So some, some recent archeology has been addressing: What are the people doing outside the cities? What, what is the relationship between commoners, what we can think of as sort of common folk, and these people who are, like you said, writing their own histories? So I think the important thing to think of is that they're, they're, everything was based around maize agriculture. So you have the most humble farmers have the same cycles of planting and harvesting, and they are thinking about the calendar and the solar year, in the same way that the kings and queens are doing it with this sort of mythological gloss, if you want to say. So there is that sort of basic understanding because they're farming the same things. So even if you don't have access to fancy stuff, you can still, you have that connection of, "We are maize farming peoples," right.

**JVN** [00:23:59] If I was, like, not from an important family and I was in Teotihuacan, like, and I was myself, so, like, I'm non-binary, I, you know, I'm really wanting to just, like, wear floaty stuff. I want to, like, dress, I'm feeling floaty and feeling texture, but I also want to suck dick. So what about that. Like, is there gay stuff? Is there non-binary stuff for people that are kings and queens and stuff? Like, how would I have fared, is what I'm trying to say? Like, wanna go to the gay bar, wanting to also be living my gender identity truth, like, is that on anyone's mind, like, back then, you know?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:24:37] So about gender, right, and thinking about how do we not project Western ideas of gender on to the archeological past because that's, the, it's a real question, right. Because how would we know? Around 200 AD in Oaxaca what people thought about men and women and non-binary and all of these questions. So what we, what do we have evidence for? So we know that, for example, in the Mayan hieroglyphs, there are very specific markers for female rulers. And so they have an actual prefix that is



about their feminine identity. And it's clear because they also said, "This is the mother of so-and-so," so it's, you can sort of trace the genealogy in that way. But, what's fascinating is that the, so remember the badass queen that I spoke to you before about is standing on top of a captive. That's a, that's a monument that's fascinating because that's, she's clearly depicting herself in a sort of typically male representation. And so we see that the men and women of Maya royal courts are, there's no sort of male dress and female dress. So we have to imagine that there was a very different understanding of male and female.

**JVN** [00:26:04] I've got to stick on that point one second! There's *no* difference in dress? Like, the outfit evidence is the same for men and women, like, so boys got to wear, like, gorgeous skirts and, like, headdresses, and, like, really ornamental, like, necklaces and stuff?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:26:20] So here is what I propose. I'm gonna take you to Copán, Honduras, because this is a fascinating Maya site and the monuments were made out of a volcanic stone, so they preserved really well. And we see kings in full skirts, full headdresses, and we also see queens wearing the same thing. So, and you think about the, like I said, these materials, the value, they are used in similar ways to adorn the body with males and females. Now there are certain things that don't cross over, like you would see a male in a loincloth and you would not see a female in a loincloth. But if, if, you know, king so-and-so is in a ceremony, they could be in full, like, knee-length or even, like, longer skirt that's made of beads of jade.

So there have been some very interesting investigations into these images because what are we looking at you know, is it a male sort of co-opting the sort of female power? Because this is a more traditional thing that a female would be wearing in the imagery. Or is it just a dif-, we're not able to access that? You know somebody who was a viewer at the time would get it. But we have to sort of check, we have to check our assumptions at the door to say this is different. And so what we, what we do have is that when the Spanish colonizers arrived, we know, and even into the colonial period and into today, we have different ideas and different words to describe gender in these Indigenous languages.

So there is, there is, there's a lot of great anthropology and linguistics having been done about what if, what if we can think about there was an Americas totally separate story here and we have different ideas and there, for example, in some languages, there's an ancestral concept of a mother-father or a grandmother-grandfather. And it's, it's one person embodying both of those ancestral forces, but it's not necessarily male or female, do you know what I mean? So I think, what I love about Mesoamerican art and writing is we can, we have these great case studies for, we have to think differently. You know, we, we

have to, we can't take what we learned in elementary school and just apply it to these cultures because they were doing their own thing.

So we have to, you kind of respect the Indigenous creation of the systems that we don't necessarily have access to. If you showed up at Teotihuacan and you wanted to do your thing and wear skirts and just, you know, dance and sing, I think it would be welcomed. I mean we see that ceremony was such an important thing that I don't think that there would have been defined roles for men or women. And we don't necessarily have that evidence. And we see very powerful images of more female deities at Teotihuacan, but they've got claws, they are, you know, they're sacrificing things. So you can't associate one, one-on-one with things because we just, it's a different story.

**JVN** [00:29:43] Well, I love that, and I think it really drives home the point that our modern understanding of the gender binary is modern and it's not the way that it has always been and that there has been lots of different ways that lots of different cultures have approached the idea of male and female or even differentiating them at all. Do we see evidence of homosexual behavior happening honey, we always, on an ancient episode of Getting Curious we have to ask. We live for gay stuff. We love homosexual stuff. We love it. Past, present, future. Is there any gorgeous deities of just, like, really Tom of Finland on Mesoamerican, like, just two guys just really, like, together or not as much?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:30:25] What's, it's an interesting question. We see a lot of, so for, I'll stick with the ancient Maya because we have the most information about them from the text. We see a lot of, I'll say homo-social activity. So we see you know, you see that there is this idea that young men need, need to be grouped together and princes would sort of be in the same space. And so, and this is, you know there's a work, there are a lot of great scholars that work on this out there in the Maya area. And, you think about, well, there is, there are rare depictions of homosexual activity in Maya art, but they're, they're kind of restricted to very intimate spaces. So one of the, the best examples, actually, it was a beautiful sort of almost graffiti that was in a cave. So you think about, you have to go into these marginal or liminal spaces to, um, represent these acts that weren't sort of in the main architectural program, right.

But we do see there must have been the concept of, like, a young men's house. And we know about this from other cultures around the world where there's something and this is, my graduate advisor wrote about this so I think about it a lot because there's something unpredictable about teenage men and so you have to kind of corral them. And then of course there's exploration. And, so there are there are some rare instances in which homosexual activity between males is represented. Off the top of my head, I can't really think about-

**JVN** [00:32:07] I just I want more lesbians, like, give me that juicy lesbian ancient, not you, just like and like any archaeologists out there. Let's find that good old cave lesbian soft core story, like, I just, we all need it.

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:32:24] We need that period drama, you know.

**JVN** [00:32:28] Yes. And I love that we have a, like, a little bit of, like, a 'Brokeback Mountain', like on, you know, like, seven to 800 AD, and I, and it's interesting that it's, like, it wasn't in the main textbook but if you go into some, like, you know, find some people's houses, they might be talking about it, which is adorable queer history through, like, the classic era, which I'm obsessed with. I can't even stand it. Ok, so what about bilingual people? Do we know about people who, like, you know, if there was different languages, like, which then made me think about jobs. What were the different jobs that people would have?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:33:06] That's a great question. And there were definitely bilingual people. And even within, for example, the Maya kingdoms, there was probably, like, a prestige language. So you think about like, like, a Latin, and then you have French and Italian and Spanish and Romanian, you know, that are spoken in different regions. So there was this sense that there may have been a *lingua franca* for people at a certain elite level. But, you know, like I said, there was a lot of long distance trade going on. So we know that those people and that were the intermediaries would have spoken a Mayan language here and then they could speak what the Teotihuacan people were speaking as well, because you have to have that communication. So definitely people were trading.

And we know that when the Spanish invaders arrived, they were successful because they, you know, basically captured people that could speak multiple languages, that-, the most famous of which is known as Malinche, who was a woman from the Gulf Coast, right, that we mentioned before. And she could speak Mayan languages as well as Nahuatl, which was the language that was the Aztec empire imperial language. So these sort of mediators would have been bilingual for sure. And thinking about people's jobs, you know, this is a great question because there's, again, just like concepts of gender, we don't want to project our concepts of economics, right, to a system that was developed in a, in a totally different context. So we do see what we think of as markets, right. So we see people specializing in things and trading in things.

But was it, like money, you know, it's hard to say. And in different places it seems like there were different economic systems in place. But, for example, there, in the 2000s, there was this spectacular set of murals found. This is, again, around 700 the site is Calakmul, Mexico,

the arch rival of Tikal that I mentioned before in our Game of Thrones storyline and at Calakmul, there were these murals that showed people in a market and it would be this beautiful portrait of a lady, she's got her little traveling hat on because we all need to take care of our SPF, right, and she was the vendor of salt, for example. And it says the title of the hieroglyphs says 'she of the salt.' and then she has a counterpart on another part of the mural, that, this is the lady who vends ceramic vessels.

She's got a basket full of pottery and she's the woman of the ceramic vessels. And we see a woman that does just maize atole. It's like, it's like a, I don't know how to say, it's like a soup, you know, thinking about like a hearty, hot meal made out of maize. There she is, and she's got her product there. So we do know that there were specializations of people. But, was that, did I come to the atole lady and give her cacao beans like I would give money today? I don't know, you know, or did I trade her obsidian blades, you know, was, what was the day-to-day economy, like? We're still teasing that out.

**JVN** [00:36:13] So we don't know if there is a currency versus, like, a bartering thing?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:36:17] Exactly. Some people have argued that shell beads would have been currency as long as, you know, as well as cacao beans, but it's not that clear. And we know that when the Aztec Empire was sort of all over the place, right before the Spanish invaded, they were trading things like obsidian and shell and cacao. So that's why we're trying to sort of bring those concepts into more ancient societies, like, the, the Maya or Teotihuacan.

**JVN** [00:36:45] What about hairdressers? Do we see any barbers? Do we see any hairdressers, massage therapists, makeup artists?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:36:52] Let's, I would say, I would put them into category-, we know that there was a very special role of, like, a healer. So thinking about wellness, you would have somebody that was kind of-, that had played a sort of spiritual role, but also very, very much about curing illnesses or, you know, doing propitious things to generate favorable er agriculture or, you know, these types of things. So I don't, you know, certainly we have great portraits of people and you definitely would have had some pretty spectacular hairdressers, especially for the classic Maya men and women, because they have some great, we've got some cool stepped bangs going on, we've got lots of high ponies.

There's a lot of, there's a lot of great hairstyles in the classic Maya art. So we know that there would have been people that specialized in that. And we also know that body ornamentation was, you know, and maybe even tattoos or scarification, so there was this, there was a whole probably industry about it. But I like to think of it as multi-layers because

these things also had a spiritual dimension, right. So, you, like, for example, oh, and I'll tell you this: one of the fascinating things about Mesoamerica is that when babies were born, often their heads were bound so that it actually pushed the cranium up into a form that was referencing a maize cob. So it's about, you are sort of claiming this connection to a maize deity. And so when you see classic Maya kings and queens, they often have this very sloping forehead and a very high sort of cranium. And that was because they were actually modifying the bones when they were infants.

And so that often, it's nice for headdresses and other, because you can really do very elaborate assemblages up there when you have that corn cob head to work with. But, I don't know it, there's, there, there's a fascinating look at what are the standards of beauty in non-Western cultures that they're, these aren't the things that they're writing about, unfortunately. So we don't have, you know, we don't have this every day kind of saying, "Oh and then the hair, the royal hairdresser came and did that." We have some of that, I feel like in ancient Egypt and other places. But for the Maya, they were really focused on their historical and sort of supernatural events. So we can only just sort of hypothesize about the beauty people that would have swirled around these royal courts.

**JVN** [00:39:36] So because this is, like, this, like, Mesoamerica is going from, like, 2000 BCE all the way up until like now, but until the Spaniards come in like 1500 I mean this is like, what I heard you saying at the very beginning is that there is ways and there is cycles like there are certain areas kind of rising and falling and is all of that due to just, like, a myriad of things, like, it could have been illness, like, a drought, it could have been a government, you know, or someone passing away, it just could have been any given bunches of things that could have caused that, right?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:40:09] Yes. They're, like, for example, we see around 900 AD, the cities like Tikal, and Calakmul that I mentioned, it's clear that something happened. It's a combination of things. It's political factors, it's environmental factors, because we see from the archeology that there was a pretty bad drought throughout the Yucatán Peninsula at that time. It could have been also conflict you know, it's thinking about people and these competing claims, right. And you have, we have evidence of warfare, we have evidence of conquest and burning and, and all of these things.

So we can imagine that just, like, societies we know in other parts of the ancient world, there were these rises and falls. And so around 900 AD, people move away from places like Tikal and Calakmul. And the rulers there, whatever authority they had was no longer working, because they're not, they're not able to build things so they're not marshaling people like they were before. And maybe people are still living around there but it's, I like

to think of it as kind of things sort of dissolve and then recombine in different ways. So, for example, have you ever been to Chichen Itza, for example? It's in-

**JVN** [00:44:02] Yes.

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:44:03] Near, near Tulum, ok, so, that is a Maya city, but it has so many different things going on architecturally because it's a little bit later. So we see people kind of migrating around, and then they come around this, and then they go here, and they go there. So Chichen Itza has kind of a mix of styles from different time periods and that's what we can see is that these different ideas come together. And we do know that in the tropical sort of jungle, really, where they're building these cities in the Maya area, there were problems with overuse of the land, we see erosion in the archeological record that would have made it a problem to have drinking water, for example. So we do know that there were sort of man-made anthropogenic causes for these types of migrations and abandonments of places. So, but, yeah, you're right, there are a lot of different factors.

**JVN** [00:42:14] So eventually does the Aztec people come in and take over everybody, is that, like, the end of the Game of Thrones story, like, before the Spaniards come?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:42:26] Essentially, yes. We have the Aztec Empire really takes off around the 1300s. So it's later than we were talking about with the Maya kingdoms. But there were millions of Maya people living in the same area just in different types of cities, right. And so we know that, for example, the Aztec traders went all the way down into the Maya area in Guatemala. Guatemala actually is, the word for the place of Guatemala, it comes from the Aztec language, as the Aztecs had a name for it. So they would come and get quetzal feathers, cacao, they were trading these things from other areas. But really they had this imperial system which, so here, if I am the Aztec lord, I come into your city, I don't burn it to the ground and kill everybody, I say, "Who's in charge? Ok, you can stay in charge, but you just have to pay us tribute. So it was this type of hegemony that worked for them and they were able to establish these networks of local governors, right."

And so you have, when the Spanish arrive, they were the major players in Mesoamerica, although it was still a very multilingual place, because, like, like I said, the Aztecs didn't really impose a lot of things. They just, so you would have the local languages being spoke even if they were sending cotton or chili peppers or jaguar pelts as tribute to the Aztec emperor, which, of course, the capital is Mexico City, the Aztec capital and the sacred precinct is right under the main plaza of Mexico City. And so there are some really exciting archeology being done because the Spanish just came in and sort of just, you know, they, they dismantled the pyramid and built the cathedral right there, but the earlier layers are still there. So we have some wonderful colleagues in Mexico City doing essentially urban

archeology, but they are finding these wonderful offerings that are telling us a lot about how the Aztecs conceived of their capital as this mythological place.

**JVN** [00:44:32] Did people, like, escape south when that happened? Like, were people able to get to South America or something, and then also this is like a two question, so bear with me, but I just read this article about this gigantic city from around the same time, but it was like outside of St. Louis-

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:44:47] Cahokia.

**JVN** [00:44:48] -It was called, yeah, and then and they were just kind of like partying it up and, like, they were, like, the article is just, like, "Can't really tell a lot about it, but, like, we can definitely tell that, like they were eating tons of deer and like getting down." Did anyone ever, like, escape that far up like from Mesoamerica or did people escape down? Like, did, like what happened when it, like, when everyone got sick?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:45:10] I mean, I think there-, it's a, that's a whole other hour we could talk about. But I would say this: we, because of what the colonizers were recording, we don't know the extent of how people interacted because those networks were disrupted by disease and by warfare, right. So, but I would say, think about marine shell, like I mentioned before, that was a really important commodity that was traded. So we see people at Cahokia importing marine shell from the Gulf Coast and we see people in the southwest importing marine shell exporting turquoise to the Aztec empire. And, for example, we see scarlet macaws showing up in Utah because of the Ancestral Puebloan people trading with peoples from Mesoamerica.

So we have to imagine that it's, let's say, there's a book out there that I recommend to students sometimes called '1491,' and it's, you, put yourself in just before everything changed, right, before this, the Americas became really the first global nexus because you think about the Caribbean, that was where everything came together in the first instance. So let's think about all, these, these peoples were clearly connected. So when the Spanish arrived, did people migrate north and south and escape, as you put it? Like, yes, probably, but we don't have those stories.

And we do see very powerful societies that resisted colonization to the present. So there were some peoples that were able to, whether because of landscape or, you know, military prowess, were able to resist that and say, "We're not, we're not playing this game, Spanish folks." So we, we see that there was, there were a variety of ways that people, Indigenous peoples adapted and have been very resilient in the face of colonization for centuries. And so, for example, in Mexico, you see today, you know, millions of people still speaking

Indigenous languages and not Spanish. And, for example, in parts of Central America, we have fully, somewhat autonomous Indigenous communities that are sort of subsumed under the modern nation state system, but are doing their own thing still.

And so you see that there are these popular narratives that everybody was kind of wiped out or, but it's we're seeing that that's just not true. And with more evidence from cuisine and anthropology and linguistics, we see that these Indigenous concepts really shaped how a lot of peoples live today. And so that's, that's another exciting thing about working on the archeology of America, because we see the ancestral traditions living today and we collaborate with our colleagues in these countries so that the descendant peoples can connect with the archeology that's going on because it's, and, and often, for example, in Peru, one of the major Indigenous languages in Peru is Quechua.

And it was the language of the Quechua empire, right. And what we know is that looking at the archeology, you have to know Quechua to understand what's going on in the material record, because there are such foundational different concepts of landscape and relationships with people that only by knowing that Indigenous language and collaborating with Indigenous interlocutors can archeologists really make arguments about what's going on in the deep past. So there's, there's this really great opportunity to work with local communities and, and be informed by these practices that, and these languages and these concepts that can lead us to better understandings of peoples and in the far, far past.

**JVN** [00:49:20] So I love that you mention that book '1491.' What are some, if people are at this point in the podcast, they're like, "I am so interested, I am so titillated, I'm about to go and roll up in this class somewhere." I mean, especially with the art because I mean, we didn't even get to, get there as specifically as I meant to because I was just, like, so obsessed with everything that was coming in my brain and I like, I'm just now getting to, like, my art questions and I'm like, oh my God, this is a whole other podcast, but where can, which I kind of do want to have you back for another one about, like, what happened when they came. What do, do we just need to have you back to have, like, a whole other thing about, like, art and then what happened when the Spaniards did come. Do you feel like, do you know about all that, you do know about all that stuff.

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:50:01] Yeah, sure [CROSSTALK]. I'll talk about it all day.

**JVN** [00:50:04] Yes, it's just our ancient episodes are so fascinating you can never do it in an hour's time because there's just so much to cover. But we do have a little bit more time and we can still do that. But I just want to have this one more question. So, like, with this art, because there's something I mean there is sculpture, there's like, you know, kind of art in caves, there's, like, also hieroglyphics, which in and of itself is kind of, it's art, it's picture.



Um, but you kind of answered, it's, like, we can't, like, impart, like, our Western understandings of it, but like so but there was artists and was there, like, was there common artists and then also, like, you know, royal artistry people, like, was there different styles, and obviously there was, and there was different eras?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:51:49] Yeah. I think, you know, what I love about studying Mesoamerican art, and art of the Americas in general before European colonization is that we see a totally different history of art. And, you know, there aren't these, you can't use terms like 'naturalism' and 'surrealism' and, you know, they don't, it doesn't fit. And what I love about, you know, some people talk about the invention of abstraction and it's like, "No, we've got abstraction in the second millennium BC in the Olmec civilization." What I love about it is that artists are clearly making choices. They're not choosing to faithfully represent, say, a jaguar or a puma. They're stylizing it in a way that's meaningful to them. And that's these, these distinct choices that artists were making in you know, it's not that they didn't know how to naturalistically sculpt a, a jaguar, it's that that wasn't meaningful to them. So how do, how do we get at those other questions? What, why are they making these distinct choices?

So I'll go back to the, the Maya kingdoms again, because that's again where we have the most information. And in that context is the only time we see artists signing their work. So we actually have named artists from classic Maya monuments and painted ceramics. So we know, we know there are a little bit more than a 100 named sculptors. And what's clear is that from certain sites, they worked in an atelier-type structure where there was actually someone in charge. So there's like a head sculptor and you have several other people working on the same monument. So you can, if you see a large standing monument, you can think of it as, there were maybe like four or five different hands. And you, and you wonder, like, was this the guy that was assigned to do faces because he was, like, really good at faces? Or was this the person that did all the glyphs, all the hieroglyphs, because they just were the scribal, you know, artistic license to do the little faces and do the dates.

So they worked together on these monuments and even with the painted pottery, because, for example, drinking cups, like, classic Maya canvases were drinking cups. So you look at these beautiful ceramics and you see that's where the painters are going to town with different supernatural narratives or portraits of rulers or just texts. So you think about, they, and then they signed their work and it's about the, the, it's not necessarily, like, just their name and, there's a little bit of a title that refers to knowledge. It's about these are the keepers of knowledge and these are the recorders of knowledge and history. So, back to your question: were there artists? Absolutely. But did they have, again, like multiple roles in their communities? Maybe they were artists and healers, maybe they were artists and stone carvers, you know, they worked on more architectural features. So we

don't know if there were sort of, like, Renaissance-type artists and patrons. But we do know that they were clearly very important to these royal courts and they were valued for their talent. And some in some contexts they were actually able to claim that by signing the work.

**JVN** [00:54:13] So, ah, I mean I have learned so much, James, I, usually what I would do at this point in the podcast is I would give you like a Yogi recess to, like, tell us, like, something that you would just be remiss, like, to not mention over the last hour and 10 or so minutes. But I think you accidentally just got yourself booked on, like, a second episode of Getting Curious because there's just so much more we have to go through. And I think at that time I will offer you a Yogi recess, *unless* there's something really genius that people should be reading about or doing before you come back to really, like, get their Mesamerican knowledge on before you come back?

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:54:54] Yeah, I would just say that there are a lot of great popular texts about the history of places like Mexico and the Maya kingdoms, so, you know, your, your listeners should be excited to go out and read that. And I think in a post-COVID reality, I would say get yourself to Mexico City, go to the National Museum, go to Teotihuacan, go to Guatemala and see Tikal and these places because there's a sense of awe that's difficult to convey in conversation or just images. It's when you're standing on top of one of the pyramids at Teotihuacan you just feel that this is such an important place and there are such rich stories waiting to be uncovered that, that's the, that's the exciting thing about working in archeology, right. And thinking about what, what more can we learn about the human experience from these different places and different peoples at different times, so it's, it's, there's a lot to talk about.

**JVN** [00:55:59] James Doyle, we're having you back because I need to hear more about, like, literal archeology, like, more of what, like, actually happens. And I need to hear all about the art and the eras and the phases of the Mesoamerican art. James Doyle, thank you so much for your time and coming on Getting Curious. We just love you. Thank you so much.

**JAMES DOYLE** [00:56:14] Thank you for having me. It's great to meet you. And I look forward to our round two.

**JVN** [00:56:18] Yes! You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was James Doyle, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

You'll find links to his work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on.

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Our editor is Andrew Carson and our transcriptionist is Alida Wuenscher.

Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Emily Bossak.