

Dancing, music, more dancing, a tour, an unveiling, dinner and speeches marked the opening of The Kirkuk museum late Thursday night here.

The event, which hosted several hundred Kurds, Turks, Assyrians, Arabs and more than a few soldiers, was the result of planning and work done by Kirkuk art and history lovers and soldiers of the 173d Airborne Brigade.

“Kirkuk needed something like this,” said Master Sgt. Joseph Issertell, coalition forces liaison to the museum. “People are here from all ethnic groups and you can see they’re having a great time, people are even looking over the walls. It’s a great chance for Kirkuk to celebrate its ethnic diversity.”

The museum has a sordid history. Used and abused as a military barracks and bomb shelter in recent years it was originally opened in 1989 when the ministry of culture opened 8 museums across Iraq. In 1991 it was looted and subsequently restocked but was again emptied due to looting during the recent conflict.

“We’re asking anyone and everyone to bring back anything that they might have taken for safekeeping from the museum before the war,” said Master Sgt. Joseph Issertell, coalition forces liaison to the museum. “Hopefully word gets out that we’re looking for any artifacts that belong in the museum and that people bring these items back for everyone to enjoy.”

The evening’s highlight may have been the unveiling of a statue in the museum’s courtyard. The statue, which sits atop a small fountain, stands close to 20’ and is comprised of

“The statue’s first stage is representative of the citadel (a well known, ancient fortress in Kirkuk),” said the statue’s sculptor Man Ahmed Hamid. “The second stage is a panorama depicting hands working, it represents the work that has made Kirkuk throughout the years. Finally the statue itself is a depiction of an ancient man, holding a clay tablet overhead on which is written a message to god.”

The museum’s opening was a struggle against time. With little more than a week it was a struggle to get the museum up and running.

“We had to do everything, from coordinating this event tonight to starting off with the removal of 15 trucks of garbage when we started,” Issertell said. “We didn’t really have much time but we made it come together.”

Besides the mundane tasks of arranging for catering, entertainment and seating there was the rather important issue of making sure the museum actually had artifacts inside, placards to describe the items.

“A lot of the items were actually donated from Baghdad,” Issertell explained. “We made contact with them, described what we were doing and they were able to send us a lot of the items on display tonight.”

Though the museum is now open, the renovations will continue with plans to eventually open two additional wings to accommodate more historical artifacts and artwork.