The San Salvador carried armament to defend the expedition from potential threats posed by the indigenous peoples encountered on the voyage, and by sophisticated maritime powers like the Portuguese and Chinese on the far side of the Pacific.

The Bombard (bombardeta)

These were the biggest guns on the San Salvador, capable of firing shot of about five pounds in weight. Bombardetas were breech-loading, mounted on simple two-wheeled carriages. They would have been used to protect the San Salvador from threats by larger craft in Asian waters, or other European vessels.

The swivel gun (verso)

Galleons like the San Salvador undoubtedly carried a number of swivel guns or versos. These had smooth barrels, and were designed primarily as anti-personnel weapons. They were mounted on the rails of more elevated parts of the vessel like the aft-most half-deck. Versos were breech loading and could fire a series of projectiles in swift succession by using pre-prepared charges. They were noted at times for being not only devastating against the crew of other vessels, but also for having the potential to explode and maim or kill their own gunners.

Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo and his companions were specifically instructed to develop peaceful relations with indigenous populations through non-violent interactions. As a further precaution, they were also advised to avoid any contact with unknown vessels.